

PART ONE: MAN

01 — A WEDDING IN CANA

We are all born needing Love, and how we find it — or don't — makes us who we are.

My mother finds me sobbing, curled up against a low stone wall not far from the celebration. My beard is soaked with my tears. My nose is hot and running. I look up at her disdain and, strangely, for once am not diminished by it, for my pain is as deep and sharp as nails. I can scarcely breathe. I lick the salt from my upper lip and turn my damp face away. I prepare myself as best I can for the lash of her scorn. I know her words will be harsh as thorns in my ears. I clutch at the ground but only loosen a handful of dirt.

“Well. What is it this time? In case you haven't noticed, you are at a *wedding!* Everyone else is happy! All join the revels except you! Several of my kinsman have commented to me. ‘Why is Jesus so forlorn?’ ‘What ails him?’ ‘Does he see something unspeakable to cause such looks of pain?’ Bad enough you have drawn attention to yourself as a soothsayer, a fortune teller, but now people take your melancholy fits as cause for worry. If only they understood what I have to suffer through. Such a whiny son is my eldest! Always with the *meme-meme-meme*, all the time with the crying. It's a pity his father, The Almighty bless and keep his soul, didn't live long enough to beat it out of him. So, tell me, Bawling One, what am I to answer?”

As she spits the words at me she waves her hands in the air. In her blue wedding finery she resembles a large bird flapping her wings backwards, contemptuousness of the sky. She wears her hair in a severe bun, making her seem much older than her forty-four years and her

face more beaky.

I consider lying, but recognize the folly of trying to fool my mother. Though she doesn't have an inkling of who I really am, she knows my weaknesses all too well. So I whisper, "The memories, they. . . ." I let the dirt sift through my fingers to form small clouds of dust over the ground. The powdery soil is very smooth against my callused fingers.

"Yes. I thought so. I knew, yes, I knew, *I knew!* I noted it in your soft eyes. Such a child you are! Don't you know six full years have gone by! Get over yourself! Listen to me, Weepy Face; I want you to make yourself useful. If you can't be with normal people, go fetch some more wine from the Baba the beverage merchant. He's about a mile north-west of town on the road to Jotapata. Maybe by the time you get back you can wish the groom and bride 'Mazel-tov', and tell them you see happiness and many male children born in Israel. Do you think this is too much for you? Can I trust you with this tiny task?"

A last large tear cascades from my nose to fall and seep, lost, into the disturbed earth. There is not even a dark spot to show where it fell. I pull air deeply into my nostrils and mumble, "No, Mother. I'll do as you ask."

"Fine. I'll tell them that's where you are." In a bustle and huff, she leaves me.

I collect myself, dry my face with my robe, brush the dirt from my hands, and see to my mother's business.

The day is very warm. My good robe itches against the hollow of my neck and edges of my wrists. Dampness pools in the middle of my chest and the small of my back. The narrow streets of Cana stink of a sweet stench much like those of Nazareth. The mud-brick walls of the closely-spaced houses are all just as gray and dull brown. The sky is the same flat slate-blue.

As at home, green carapaced horse-flies spin in endless waves over glossy-surfaced, mustard-colored, murky puddles between the uneven cobblestones. Everything so identical with my town, but I'm still mindful that I'm alone in a strange place. The shadows seem bloated with the sneering ghosts of other people's kin. It feels like even The Holy One has forsaken me.

I pass no one. I see no one. All are at the wedding. It is very quiet except for the slap of my sandals against the street and the lulling, trilling coo of pigeons from a nest crammed in the corner between two of the taller buildings. Suddenly a pair of lambs, hearing my approach, bolt from a doorway deeper into a building. The noise of their frantic hooves gives me a fright. Like a child my mother accused me of being, I shriek. After I look about me to see if my alarm has been witnessed — it hasn't — I lean against a wall and try to still my heart before it wriggles out of my chest. Even in the heat, my spine seems painted with strokes of ice.

Before my breathing has evened, I'm staring back behind me. I take several steps further down the street. I stop. Hesitate. I'm not thinking. No. I can't form a complete thought. Filled with a constricting tension that is too strong to comprehend I hurriedly sidle through the narrow spaces between the stone buildings. I can only half-guess that I'm headed the right way. I'm desperate with the fear that I'm lost. As I draw closer to the square, I'm relieved to hear the sounds of laughter from the party echo dully against the inward slanting walls over my head. In my haste to find a short-cut I force my body through ever more and more cramped spaces, scraping my elbows and shredding my robe. Finally, finally, I'm back. Furtively, I crouch behind a pile of huge pile of loosely woven baskets used to haul manure. I peer through the dung-crust wooden slats at the bridal table. I keep low and try to ignore the acrid smell of goat doo.

She sits in the center of her attendants like a queen, her long red hair spread about her

shoulders, symbolizing her purity and her innocence. Most often her lake-green eyes, flat with boredom, stare blankly into the middle distance. The dancing men shout rude jests about the connubial events of the upcoming evening, but no flash of a blush darkens her pale cheeks. She gnaws on a grape after grape, puckering her full, cerise lips around the fruit, sucking out the pulp, and then haughtily tossing the empty skin and pips at the nearest cavorting guest. The only time she smiles is when a servant offers her another dainty honey-sweetened treat, and then she smiles easily.

I watch her for a long time, my fascination total. All forms of pain have left me. The peace is so complete that I fear my every breath will dissolve the spell that comforts me. It has been so long, too long, since last I felt free of the soul-slicing wires of my suffering. I'm calm. I feel I'm in a dream out of my childhood, before so much else happened to me. I hear a high, haunted lullaby from pipes no one is playing. I had only glanced at her veiled face before and had been quickly swollen with stale but yet-powerful memories beyond my ability to contain. Even as I wept for all that I've lost, the barest glimpse her profile intrigued and enthralled me. Emotions I thought sealed from my life this side of Abraham's bosom surge within me in time to my pulse. Surprise, disbelief, and delight force the horror of my sin of covetousness from my thoughts.

"I guess Madeline is *just* that beautiful," a voice casually mentions, soft, into my ear. A mustached lip brushes my lobe. His warm breath runs along my cheek.

Startled once again, I slam myself back against the wall of the building. A slender young man of twenty, his cheeks only barely touched with colorless down, smirks at my widen eyes. His right eyebrow arches as he considers me. Mirth flickers like candle flames in his dark cinnamon eyes. Fires of shame and guilt and horror flare across my face and chest. I shut my

eye lids tightly anticipating that he will call attention to my spying. I'm not looking forward to Mother putting on a lengthy show of wailing and beating her breast in lamentation over how I have disappointed her and our ancestors. The people of Nazareth are fairly used to it. I dread the display in front of complete strangers. I'm sure that the drunken party guests will then wish to have sport with me. And the most chilling of all, *she* will think me churlish.

The youth only chuckles, "Sorry. That was pretty rude of me. I'm John, Son of Zebedee. I'm her groom." He takes my hand and pats it gently like I'm a agitated kitten to be soothed. His fingers slide slowly across the back of my hand and between my knuckles. Beneath the scent musky-spice perfumes of his wedding day that ooze from his hair to the brightly embroidered shawl on his shoulders I catch a hint of fish and the sea.

"I'm Jesus, Son of Joseph, from Nazareth with my mother, cousin of your bride's mother's second husband."

"So now we're related! Nifty. Pardon me for asking, but are you the one I've heard stories about, the one who's dreams come true, like Joseph, not your father, the one with the rainbow robe?"

"Yes. But it only works sometimes. Not terribly often, really. Usually it's all jumbled."

"Do you perhaps see anything about me? Maybe about tonight?" John asks urgently. He still holds my hand, our fingers curled together.

The thought of my mother reminds me of my errand. "You're going to run out of wine." I say.

"Wow, that's really good! Of course, I already knew that. Dad's a bit on the cheap side — no, a lot on the cheap side. Okay, okay, tell me more. Think 'Marriage Bed.' What do you see? Be specific, graphic if you have to. I can take it, . . . I think. Do I seem nervous to you?"

“Maybe some other time. I . . . , I have to go. I must go. I’m sorry.” I climb to my feet and swiftly dart down a wider alley.

“Sure, come for a visit. You can gawk at my wife.” John calls after me.

“I don’t have any. What are you going to do about it?” Baba says sourly through his four remaining teeth. He thumps a thick hand on the unfinished cedar counter of his shop. Beneath his long nails and the front of his tunic are stained purple. His eyes are half-closed and only partially focused. His breath is ripe with his product. His thick lips are very moist, particularly in the corners.

“None?” I’m stricken. I hear my mother’s shrill rebuke. Worse, I see Madeline’s wedding ruined when the guests get nasty after the wine runs out. My stomach hurts from my abrupt parting from her presence. I had entertained fantasies all the way over of her gratitude to me for having fetched potables for her friends. It hasn’t been my day in many ways.

“Not a fricken drop. Sorry.” He smiles. It’s an unsavory sight. There is something offensively subtextual about his leer that disturbs me. I don’t have to wonder long as he too casually leans back against a keg behind him filling the cramped shop with the noise of sloshing liquid. “Oops,” he says, grinning cruelly again. “I’d like to help you out, but I ain’t got *none*.”

“Well, if you’re tapped, you’re tapped.” I say agreeably. “Nothing to be done.” I turn to go, then stop. “Sir, you know, you appear to be an interesting fellow. Would you mind if I just sit here for a bit and maybe chat. It’s so *hot* today, and I rushed over. I’m a bit dizzy.” I don’t want to get back to face my mother yet. I need to become very calm before I see John’s bride again. I must keep calling her that in my mind. She belongs to someone else.

“Suit yourself.” Baba noisily wiggles the keg again and heaves his bulk on top of it. He

takes a deep slurp from a wooden mug and gargles before swallowing. He sticks out a violet tongue and belches loudly.

I sink onto a tree stump placed against the wall. I begin to actually feel somewhat faint. I push my fingers into the corners of my eyes on the sides of my nose until the veiled mental image fades. I notice that Baba's eyes watch me carefully. He is leaning forward, anticipating incorrectly that I have the strength to argue with him. I wonder why he's so angry. Obviously, he has wine and wants me to know that he does. What else might he feeling?

"It's a pity you're sold out. I really could use a drink right now," I admit miserably.

"Breaks my heart." Baba sneers.

"And I heard you had the best wine in Galilee. Rumor has it you don't just throw the grapes together and make purple piss like the other vintners. I wanted so much to try your product to see if it's as good as they say. I'm from Nazareth way. I don't know when I'll be back here again."

"Who told you that, the stuff about my wine?"

"Several people. Kronkie the Big Land Owner and Asher the Levite Priest."

"Oh, yeah. They said that?"

"Hym-hymm. They said that there should be another word for Baba's wine. The vinegary swill most try to pass doesn't deserve the name." Would it be considered False Witness, I wonder, if I fib to Honor My Mother? Of course, I'm not flattering Baba to actually honor Mother's wishes, but her command to get more wine matches my immediate goal. Also since Baba is lying to me does it balance the scales? My head spins. I might need to talk to a scribe to see if a sin-offering is required. It almost always is.

"Gee." Baba's eyes are wide open and he has a paw to his lips.

“Too bad for me you haven’t any.”

“Yep, *nothing* for you people,” he says with a tone several degrees beyond bitter.

“Which people might this be?”

“Friends of that stuck-up Zebedee. Invited everyone in town to his son’s wedding except me. He wanted me to give three pots of wine as a wedding gift to be included with what he bought. I said that I’d be happy to give a gift to the young couple not to him. So he bought his wine from Amos and didn’t invite me.”

“You didn’t get your invitation? There must be some mistake. That explains why you weren’t there! Some people were asking for you. They thought you were too busy with your affairs to attend.”

“Who?”

“Uh . . . John, yeah, John. Young, thin guy. The groom! Wanted to ask your advice about the wedding night. John said, ‘Baba’s a real man of experience. He’d tell me how to be gentle.’”

“And that’s so true. I do know.” Baba’s eyes get even larger. He places his hand on his chest.

“Well, you’re a busy man. I have to take back this bad news to the celebration. No one is going to believe me. I’m sure that they’ll think that a man with the forethought of Baba would have laid in plenty of wine knowing that Amos couldn’t possibly cover the needs of such a big wedding. Your orders must have just been unexpectedly high.”

“It’s been busy. Well, more like steady.”

I look about the empty shop and out at the deserted road. “Trade has dwindled some lately.”

“But it could pick up any second. The wine profession is like that.”

“Oh, I forgot to mention the worst part.”

“What’s the worst part?”

“Have you ever seen the bride, Madeline?”

“No. I hear she’s from Magdala.”

“The sight of her has moved some men to . . . *gawking*.” It felt very virtuous to tell some of the truth. I felt sorry for Baba. He seemed lonely.

“Not . . . *gawking*!”

“Yes. *Open gawking*.” I gave him a knowing look.

“Wait, wait. Wait, wait, wait. I have . . .” He jumped up and grabbed the barrel he was sitting on. “No. This is puke. This will not do.” He shoves the barrel away in disgust. He stomps his foot for a few minutes as he thinks. Then he slaps himself on the forehead. “I have six casks of some special stuff I’ve been saving for a real occasion. It’s very complicated to make. First you smoke the grapes with brimstone before you put them — with the stems, mind you — into the vat . . .” He pauses long enough to move the counter out of the way exposing a roughly dug cellar beneath it. He jumps in and messes about in the dark. With effort he passes a huge cask through the hole to me.

He continues to explain every painstaking detail of wine manufacture as we load the heavy beeswax coated wooden casks from his cellar onto his donkey cart. I wonder how mother expected me to carry even one of the things all the way to the wedding.

“How the Gehenna did Bartholomew find the nerve to show up after trying to cheat me when I offered a fair price to buy his swill?” Zebedee thunders in my ear as I roll a earthen pot

filled with water for handwashing down the ramp from the doorway of the synagogue. The water sloshes all over my sandals and spots Zebedee's fancy wedding robe. Zebedee has been drinking heavily. His oiled hair and beard, black as tar with streaks of bone white, have been twisted into ropes and circle his face like spokes of a wheel. Just to make matters even more complicated my mother joins us.

"Why is Baba here?" Mother asks Zebedee. "I thought you had a fight." The pot overbalances on the incline; I catch it, but water douses them both. I almost didn't mean it. I wonder when next a scribe will be in Nazareth. I've been *so* naughty.

"Whoops. Sorry about that. I invited Baba." I wheeze before grunting with the effort in moving the pot.

"You what?" Zebedee glowers at me. The veins on his forehead swell as his ruddy cheeks darken. He re-twirls a side lock with his left as he grabs the water pot to stop the splashing and my advancement with his right.

"Can I be hearing this? Can this be true? My son went behind this good man's back to include riffraff in his son's wedding? Oh, the complete and utter shame. . . ."

I know all of the opening lines to my mother's histrionic psalms of lamentation. The one beginning with "Oh, the complete and utter shame" is particularly long and strident. Unless I can head it off the wedding will devolve into cheap Greek drama.

"Baba regretted his foolishness about not giving you a gift of three pots and decided to give you six without your needing to buy anything. He had to help me carry them here. He'll leave if you want." I shout this over Mother's second verse about the hateful, spiteful scorpion she painfully carried in her womb for nine wretchedly long months.

She pauses and looks at Zebedee. She needed to draw a breath anyway. The next verse is

three paragraphs long. He looks at me thoughtfully.

“It’s his best stuff, too.” I add.

“Oh. Well, okay then. What are you doing?” Zebedee asks.

“Baba says that he needs to pour the wine over from the wooden casks into clean pots. He has to give the wine some air. I don’t begin to understand it. It’s technical.”

“Do as Jesus says.” Mother advises. “Baba may be a lout, but he knows wine.”

“I’ll need five more clean pots.” I say.

“I’ll have the servants send some.” Zebedee agrees.

“You go back to handing out the sweets and nuts to the kiddies. I’ll take care of the wine.” It was a custom to give children special goodies to help them remember the wedding day should witnesses to the lawful marriage ever be needed in the future.

When I get back to Baba he’s chipped the wax from the tops of all the casks. “When do we gawk at the bride?” he asks.

“Later,” I say dumping the water out. “So, Baba, your full name is Bartholomew?”

“Yeah, but everyone calls me Baba; it’s much easy to say when drunk and calling for more wine. Try it sometime.”

Three servants arrive with the first of the additional water pots. Baba and I carefully pour the wine from the wooden casks into the pots, filling them to the brim. It’s difficult as we need to be extremely gentle not to let the sediment from the bottom of the cask get mixed back into the wine.

“I may not know wine at all,” I say to Baba, “but isn’t it supposed to be red and not smell quite so much like spoiled eggs?” I’m nervous as the servants have already left in a rush to tell Zebedee we are pulling a prank on him.

“That’s just the brimstone. It goes away in about a half hour. I actually used eggs in making the wine to get it to be so clear. You spread a layer of beaten egg white on the top and sinks to the bottom of the cask like a net, taking the impurities . . .”

I have already learned far more than I really wanted about wine, so I look in the direction of the wedding, hoping for a glimpse of Madeline. I’m shocked to see her making her way to us with John, his father, my mother, and the wine steward. I offer a heartfelt prayer to the Holy One to make this wine be at least not too offensive to drink.

“Are you blessing the wine?” Madeline — John’s wife — asks.

“Something like that,” I squeak.

The wine steward raises his ladle and starts to dip in the nearest pot. I thump Baba who’s gawking at Madeline and hiss, “Is it ready yet?”

Baba looks briefly away to the sun, considers where it was when we started and points to the first pot. “That one should be. Mind you this wine is better in winter when it’s cold. But it should be pretty good now. It’s best served with chicken and soft cheeses. It has a fruity, resonant bouquet with a piquant finish. It’s aged for five years. ‘25 was a great year for grapes.” Baba is referring to the years of the reign of our tetrarch, Herod Antipas, who coincidentally started ruling Galilee during the year of my birth.

The steward dips his ladle into the first pot. Madeline reaches out her hand and asks before he can taste, “May I?”

He hands her the ladle, and she tips it to those lips. Her jade eyes open in surprise. She looks at the wine. For a horrible moment I think she will spit it out, but instead she drains the draught.

The steward takes back the ladle and dips again. He swirls it around, sniffing it and laps a

bit. A look of joyful surprise fills his face. “This is incredible, the best wine I’ve ever tasted. And it looks like water. Zebedee, you’re a sneaky devil to hold this nectar until the end. I misjudged you. I thought all you bought was that cheap vinegar. Your guest will leave with the memory of this on their tongues,” he exclaims.

“Jesus has done a miracle!” John says. I wasn’t paying attention, but he’s standing very close to me again. He grins at me.

I move away slightly and say, “It was Baba. He made the stuff.”

“No, John’s right; my son deserves the credit. He is not that bad a boy.” That sentence is the entirety of her speech for when she was happy with me. I don’t hear it that often. I turned to talk to Madeline, but she has already left after directing the steward to send a pitcher of the wine to her table. Zebedee, Mother, and John follow her back, the latter reluctantly lead by the former.

Baba hands me a ladle of wine. “That will be two minas, forty seven shekels, but I’d think a three whole minas would be more fair as I did deliver it.”

“Four and a half pounds of bronze for a cup of wine?”

“For six pots, Mister Miracle worker. Zebedee thinks it’s a gift. I don’t know where he got that idea.”

“Oh. Right. Um, I don’t have it with me. Can I send it to you? I’ve been saving for three years to take a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, mostly to get away from my mother, but why store up riches on earth? It just rusts anyway.”

“Okay. I’m not in any hurry. The wine was just sitting there. But, can I trust you? I’ve heard nothing good comes from Nazareth.”

“I think so. I’m a pretty honest fellow.” I drink from the same ladle she drank from. I

imagine it still feels warm from her lips. It *is* the best wine I've ever tasted.

02 — ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER JORDAN

My head hurts very much. I'm extremely thirsty but can't keep water down. My joints ache. My world is a blur. My mouth tastes like noxious combinations of several bitter acids. Earlier on the way home the road from Cana to Nazareth seemed to expand from ten miles to eternity. Mother wouldn't shut up about how much wine I drank yesterday. It's not as if I acted in an improper fashion, it's just the amount that bothers her. All I did was keep up with Baba. Of course, he's used to it. I've never been drunk before. I sat at my place numbly and listened to Baba expound on what a great time he was having while occasionally taking large swallows from my cup because I liked the taste. I acted exactly as I would have sober except normally I would have been drinking water. I dislike regular wines. I recall that sometime during the late evening I was back behind the dung baskets gacking my guts out while Baba and John held me up. I slept fitfully, packed with nineteen or so other guests in an alley that no one used to dump refuse.

I don't feel like working. I'm making a simple wooden plow blade for Jake the barley farmer. Usually I can look at a piece of wood and the long, layered grain suggests the ideal shape for the implement I need to create. All that is needed is to free the tool from the curling shavings that surround it. Today, my listlessness has caused me to ruin two beautiful cedar

stumps. In my shaky hands the stone plane slides with too much pressure causing fissures, splitting the wood into twain jagged, unusable lumps.

I look into the shadows in the corner of my shop where the crushed cradle gathers dust and cobwebs. I worked on it for six months using every moment of my spare time. It is the finest thing I have ever created. The outside was adorned with reliefs of flowers and cherub wings. I had polished the Holm-oak until the surface of the wood seemed translucent. My fellow joiners and other towns people used to visit my shop just to marvel over it's magnificence. Perhaps that's vain for me to mention, but it's true.

Mother was so very angry with me for destroying it. She had thought it would have been better to sell it to some rich person for many, many minas instead of repeatedly slamming it with the large stone until nothing was left but sharp splinters. She also can't understand why I never cleaned the pile of refuse that remains. The moldy bits are quite untidy. But it was mine, and it's my shop, so it was broken and so it stays. I kneel and pluck a fragment of a petal of a wooden lily. The lilies of the field were Joanna's favorite flowers. I placed a finely etched spray above the canopy that would have shaded the babe's face. I can partially recall what the finished cradle looked like, but I can't remember carving the flowers. All that remains is the barest aftertaste of what sweet happiness that was once my life.

I'm past wondering what terrible sin I committed to cause such a calamity to be visited upon me. I'm positive that Joanna was beyond all possibility of stain. I merely have accepted my punishment and come to terms with the judgment of my Creator. The Holy One has given His people the Gift of Law, but not an understanding of His Ways.

In the years since, I've given myself over to the wood, becoming more like my medium than a man. Every day I pull myself from my pallet, pour food and air into my body, and work

until my muscles or the light faded towards dusk. In the evening I lay upon my pallet waiting for sleep and struggle to keep past events away from my mind. I review instead the day's work or plan the next morn's labors. The blandishments of my mother help me to keep the commandments of The Most High on the proper day of the week and seasons of the year. My beard is longer; my robe is more worn, but inside nothing has changed.

I rub the petal. Dust and mold coat my thumb.

I thought nothing would ever happen to me again until Father Abraham called me to his table. I thought nothing could ever cause me to alter my life. Until yesterday when something completely different occurred.

I wept.

Yesterday old memories and a new smile forced the grain and split my wooden heart passed all possibility of repair. Perhaps, given a clearer mind, unfettered by the lingering after-effects of Baba's delectable potion I might have just kept on, returned to the walking statue that morning to night, night to morning shaved away the years of my life creating a long, worn, overly-familiar, channel. I look around the shop, wondering if there is anything I wish to carry with me. I tuck the petal in a fold of my robe. There is nothing else. I wish I had finished Jake's plow. His old one can barely bite the earth. Perhaps one of my brothers will take the contract. It is my only open obligation. At least Jake hadn't left a deposit. He was supposed to deliver five sheaves of grain on the third day of next week. I take the wood chip, the symbol of my draft from behind my ear and leave my shop. I leave the wood.

I don't plan to miss it.

"What are you going to do with it, I would like to know." Mother demands.

“I have a debt I must pay. Please, just give it to me, Mother. Let’s not argue.”

“I’m an arguer now, am I? You have incurred a liability of five months wages, and I’m just to hand it to you, no questions asked? This is how your father raised you? This is what you were taught? What can this debt be that you won’t explain it fully to your mother who has only your welfare at heart? What further sin has my foolish son done this time? I’m probably better not knowing, it must be so unspeakable. Could it be gambling? I don’t think it’s women. No, don’t tell me. I can only bear so much disappointment from you. First you act like little baby, then you become a sponge for Zebedee’s wine, and now this! Oh, the complete and utter shame . . .”

“Mother, stop! Give me the three minas. Now.”

She looks at me like I’m possessed. I don’t stop to consider whether that might be true. I do know that I’m filled with purpose. I push my palm at her. I have never stood up to her before. I’m tight with fear that she will continue to refuse. She glares at my face. I keep my eyes even. I somehow don’t flinch.

“I have to go. Please.” I add.

“You better have a good reason. I want to hear where every shekel is spent. Don’t think you are getting away with anything. No. I’m warning you. You aren’t so old that a rod would do no good.” Slowly, for almost an hour, she counts out the one hundred fifty shekels into a kid bag. She has to stop and start over twice as she loses the figure. My watching just makes her all the more deliberate. To take my mind off the too gradual clinking I pick up a coin and study the fig leaf, the symbol of the holy temple, crudely etched in the bronze.

Mother holds out the bag. Her sour expression doesn’t hide from me that I’ve hurt her. I feel very guilty but seize the bag just the same.

“I’m going away for a while. I’m not sure when I’ll be back.”

“Where to, may I at least know?”

“I’m not certain. I have no real plans.”

“You’ll keep the law, wherever you end up?” She turns from me and fusses with a skein of wool.

“Yes. I promise.”

“You’re going for some reason you might share with your mother? Or is that something you don’t know either?”

“It’s just time for me to leave.”

“Perhaps you are finally over . . . the mess. The wedding made you think, no? You are going to seek out a woman. None of the girls of Nazareth have pulled your fussy eye, so you take to the road. I don’t see why you think you’re so hightone. Why are you so picky-picky? Who would be comfortable with a gloomy person such as you? I know I won’t miss having you around.”

“I’ll miss you,” I tell her. I actually might. As abrasive as she is, I’m accustomed to her constant hectoring. I don’t correct her incorrect guess.

“Then do me a favor and make sure this bride of yours is first a daughter of Israel and second respectful of her mother-in-law.”

“Of course.”

“How odd to leave this late in the day. Better put it off until morning. Perhaps if you sleep on it, it won’t seem like such a good idea. Stay. Look a little harder here. I’ll talk to Benjamin the cheese maker. He has four daughters.”

“May the Holy One keep you until I return, Mother.” I say as I depart. I would hug her,

but she waves me away.

“Boy, you didn’t have to pay quite so promptly. I know I made a crack about your hometown, but it was all in fun. No serious slight intended.” Baba says after I give him the sack of bronze. He pours me a draught of wine but the smell of it still makes me queasy. I’ve walked all night. I didn’t feel like sleeping. I arrived at Baba’s shop long before he opened and sat against the door frame until he came out. Towards dawn I may have dozed. I can’t be sure. My life has taken on an entirely dream-like quality that makes it hard to tell the difference.

“Do you have any milk instead?” I ask.

“Sure.” He pours some in to a bowl from a bucket behind the counter and hands it to me with some hardtack. “Here’s some breakfast too.”

I dip the cracker in the bowl and snap off a piece with my bicuspid. It like chewing a paving stone, but I’m hungry. After I finish the hardtack I drain the milk. I feel better.

“That was some wedding, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Sheer spectacle.”

“I had a great time. And the guests really liked my wine! The long toast the groom made about how we had saved his wedding made me blush, but it was tastefully done. Have you known John long? He made it sound as you were very close friends.”

“No, we only met that day.”

“Really? Well you must just have that effect on people. Not that I mind, but what are you back here so soon? I thought you had work to do back at your village.”

“I decided to take some time off.”

“And do what?”

“I don’t know.” I hold out my bowl for more milk and drink deeply. My eyes are burning. I keep forgetting to blink. It seems that the only thing that keeps me from exploding like an seriously overfed sheep is the crushing pressure I feel all about me. I wipe away the milk along my jaw with my sleeve. I’ve paid my debt. I don’t know what to do next. The only thing I’m sure of is that I *can’t* go back. Truth-to-tell, long range planning is a weakness of mine. I have trouble with long views.

“You know, Jesus, if you don’t mind my mentioning this, you don’t look that well today. You seem all out-of-sorts.”

“I might be.”

“I was thinking yesterday, before you showed up, when I was feeling all left out, alone and such that I might go see that new prophet. I hear he dips you in the river and all your troubles leave you and just float downstream. Maybe we could go see him together. He might be able to cure what ails you. If you don’t want to, no big deal. I could use the company.”

“Okay.”

He claps his big hands in delight. “Great. But I think you better sleep for a bit. We’ll start tomorrow. There’s some hay here behind the bar. You make yourself comfortable. I’ve got a couple of things I’ve got to get done today.”

“Okay.”

I crawl onto the soft silage and fall into the deepest, most restful sleep I’ve known in years.

“Scum! How dare you presume to come to me? I can see your hearts rotted and coursing with maggots. The Time of Judgment is upon us! You filthy, filthy carrion. How the Holy One

hates you. Any day Wrath — Wrath! — will be visit this land and all who have not Begged — Begged! — No — Pleaded! — for forgiveness will be cast to the fires of the outer dark! None of you is safe. None can escape the excruciating, tormenting vengeance!” the Baptist yells at us.

“Oh, this cheers me right up.” I murmur to Baba.

“We can’t leave,” Baba whines. “We haven’t been baptized yet.”

The gaunt prophet has been raving for about two hours. He capers about in the shallows of the river. His voice keeps breaking into a shrill screech. Usually his eyes are rolled back so I can only see the whites. His skeletal fingers scratch the air. He has the half-tanned, smelly hide of a camel wrapped around his body secured with a leather strap that has a long loose end that he occasionally beats himself with. There are deep welts on his neck and forehead. His hair is caked with mud. Before he started in with his harangue we had the treat of watching his scarf his breakfast of fat, green, wiggling grasshoppers dipped in honey. He chewed with his mouth open, too. Bits of mandibles and wings are stuck to his cheeks and in his beard. We are surrounded by a throng of several hundred people. Some wail along with him and pound their foreheads against the stony ground. A woman a little ways off has even broken her own nose from too forcefully genuflecting. Blood sprays out with her squeals. Worse, none of them has any sense of rhythm. It would be at least tolerable if they would try to thump together. Every ten minutes or so another penitent tentatively approaches the prophet. He takes a mouthful of the muddy water and spits it in their faces, screaming his contempt. Then they thank him, kiss his hand, and go back to bashing their heads against the sodden dirt.

“Who *is* this guy?” I ask.

A tall, pale kid with red hair to my right barks to me in a voice clotted with reverence, “He is called John. His father, Zechariah, was a much respected priest of the high temple. For

reasons known only to Heaven his mother, Elizabeth, was kept barren for many, many years. Then like the revered Sarah, Elizabeth conceived even though she was past her time of child-bearing. By Divine Command they raised their son in complete piety as no other before him. Thrice a day he was made to pray on bended knee for three hours. Five times a day was he given the lash to make him mindful of the Holy One's will. He was taught to fast for days on end. After his parents died John went into the wilderness and there found his mission to save us from The Horror That Comes Swiftly. John's every breath is dedicated to The Creator. He now preaches daily to save those who will listen and curse those who will not."

"How did his parents die?" Baba asks. "Were they taken to Father Abraham in a fiery chariot for following the Holy One's will so carefully?" I motion for Baba to shush and not egg the guy on.

"Actually his father was mistakenly murdered by his fellow priests for heresy and his mother, deprived of her means of support and made a pariah, slowly starved to death. But that's not important. John is The Way to Salvation. The signs are all so plain that the end of the world is coming this very year, maybe even by the next Sabbath. My friend Andrew over there keeps the list if you'd like him to recite them to you." He points to a short, thick-set man near the river bank who is keeping the line to baptism orderly.

"We got here just in time!" Baba says.

"Uh-huh." I reply and shuffle forward in the line to be baptized. I hate to admit it but I actually have hope that this desert wildman will bring me peace. The history of my people is riddled with the tales of how the Master of the Universe has a decidedly strange taste in choosing His messengers. I'm as anxious as Baba to be forgiven. My burden of shame and guilt weighs inside me like a leaden bucket of smoldering coals. I'm no different than anyone else in my

terror of divine anger. I don't know what I have done to make the Holy One despise me, but after what He has done to me, it is abundantly clear that despise me He must. I am eager to do *anything* to make amends. John could be my chance to once again know at least some measure of absolution. Though I'm scornful of the circus about me, I'll be adding an off-tempo head-slam along with the rest if John's baptism brings me once again the Sense of Grace.

"I'm Bartholomew, but you can call me 'Baba' — everyone does — and this is Jesus. We're from Galilee."

"I'm Judas from Kerioth. I've followed The Master for nine months now. If you have any questions please feel free to ask me or Andrew. He's from Galilee too."

"Thank you," Baba gushes. "This is so exciting."

"We are also the ones responsible for collecting the sin offerings if you care to show the Divine One your gratitude for His servant's work. Unlike the temple we take all major currencies at par. We prefer coin, but goods are always cheerfully accepted." He rattles his leather coin bag.

"We'll keep that in mind," I tell Judas with a smile. He moves on to the next mark.

It's early evening by the time my turn comes. I kneel nervously, expectantly in the muck and bow my head. I feel *very* stupid but still can't deny my anticipation. I'm in the river up to my chest. The muddy water slides around me. It is chilly against my skin. I should be making my soul ready for Divine Transformation, but I'm too worried about leeches.

Off to our right, the wailing and head thumping inexplicably stop. The quiet spreads as the crowd turns to look at an ornate litter being borne on the shoulders of burly Levite priests. Slender acolytes prance ahead carrying standards with banners embroidered with stylized fig trees. A cadre of temple guards form side wings. The rough gendarmes scan the crowd for

trouble and fan out around the Levites as they lower the litter to the ground. The curtain parts, and Pope Caiaphas himself is helped from the plush interior. Caiaphas is a wizen old gent with a sad, solemn half-smirk under his neatly combed, but untrimmed beard. An attendant carefully places a peaked miter on Caiaphas's balding head.

“The Viper's Son comes to visit. Has the fear of Hell forced the snakes from their lairs like worms in the rain?” John sneers.

Caiaphas chuckles, straightens his robes of office, and adjusts the miter a fraction. “The Viper's son-in-law, actually. No, John, I'm just here to ask you a few simple questions. I'm sorry I don't have a sweet-meat to give you as I used to when I asked you your lessons and bounced you on my knee. Remember that, John? You were such a bright little boy. I should have brought a sweat-meat. Poor prior planning on my part.”

“Are you going to ask me about the End of All That Is?”

“No, not really. But I'm willing to listen for a while if it would please you.”

“The Author of Creation is coming! His Right Hand is a Claw! His Left Hand is Fire! He will scoop those who displease Him, set them alight, and cast them into the abyss, sealing it forever behind them.

“That's a very sad notion, John. Why would The Holy One do this to His people? After going to the trouble to lead us out of Egypt why would He then just destroy us? He could have just left us there. Don't we have His Mark in the rainbow that His Wrath is satisfied?”

“The Master of the Universe can make more people out of the mud and stones of this river if He so wishes. He has sent me to show The Way. I am charged to tell all that His next time of anger is at hand. The signs are all so plain!” John has worked himself into a frenzy. Ropes of spittle join the insect parts in his beard. Some sprays my face. I dare not wipe it away.

“Could you, well, name three.” Caiaphas asks softly.

John is gasping; his eyes are all but out of their sockets. I reach up to steady him, but he swats my hand sharply.

Andrew steps forward and proudly intones, “There are wars and rumors of war. The Tetrarch of Galilee beds the wife of his brother. The Temple of Israel is once again under foreign dominion from the East. The moon was . . .”

“Three is all I asked for.” Caiaphas interrupts. “Well done. Now, John, my questions: Do you think yourself the Messiah?”

John, again in control of himself, answers, “No. He is coming after my time. Though I am sand beneath his sandals, I am his harbinger, his herald. As it was written,

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness!

“Prepare ye the way of the Redeemer.

“Make straight the paths for him.””

“Yes. Pretty close. You left a few words out. Isaiah. Scroll Forty, Third Verse. the voice calls in the *desert* a path *for* not *of* the Redeemer. And it’s:

“Make straight in the wilderness

“A highway for our Creator.’

“Who taught it to you? Do you remember, John?”

“You. You did. Before . . .”

“Yes. I guess I didn’t do such a hot job. I wouldn’t have needed the sweat-meat after all. That’s it. All I wanted to know. If you did think you were the Messiah I’d have more to ask, but . . .” He hold out his groomed fingers in surrender. “Thank you for your time.” Caiaphas hands his miter to the footman and makes ready to ease his old frame into the litter.”

“You’ll burn in perdition!” John bellows.

“Well, the heat will be good for my arthritis.” Caiaphas replies. “And, John, for what it’s worth, you should go easy on the bit about the Tetrarch. The queen is a very sensitive woman. She could make life . . . unpleasant.”

“I will laugh at you while your flesh withers on your bones! You will beg me for a drop of water, but I will not even dampen your lips.”

Caiaphas sighs, “I realize it is much, much harder to guide souls to Heaven than to scare them from Hell, but you really must work on your material.”

The retinue makes its slow way up the arroyo, and John turns back to me. He gulps some water from river using his clawed hands and yanks up my chin to see me clearly. I stare into his mad, mad eyes as he expectorates full in my face.

“You are below all under the sun, and will be less than fleas.” John sneers hoarsely. His voice is so spent I think I’m the only one to hear. I’m confused as he hasn’t said a word directly to any other penitent all day.

Suddenly an anxious titter passes through the crowd. They all surge to the river to get a look at me. I fear that they will stone me or drown me. They must see how I feel inside — that I am only pretending, following through the charade. My pain has not left me either. If anything it has redoubled. I stand, surprised at my disappoint. I stagger towards the shore. The crowd falls back away from me. Judas and Baba follow me as I climb the scrub strewn hill dragging my soaked robes that are twisted about my ankles.

“Did he say it; did he really say it?” Baba hastily chortles to me before turning to take his place in the river.

“Say what?” I ask Judas, wondering where I could get a decent bath or at least wash my

face.

“You are The Beloved Son, in whom He’s well pleased.” Judas says. “That’s what Baba, Andrew, and I heard. Do I say it right?”

“Yeah, it was something like that.” I say.

“We all heard John tell the pope you were the Messiah. How good of you to allow John to baptize you.” Judas says. “He should have begged you to baptize him.”

“A messiah is just that kind of guy. Look, Judas, right now I need to be alone. You understand.” I stop and grasp his shoulder. “Would you please, watch out for Baba for me.”

“Anything for you,” he intones while falling to his knees.

I trot off before my burly vintner friend is through with his baptism and disappear into the gathering darkness.

03 — IN THE WILDERNESS OF JUDEA

I'm lost in the exquisite beauty of the full moon filling the sky over the bleak and empty desert. It is my second moon since I arrived. The first was just after my initial week in the wilderness. The sky is so very *exposed* here. I never noticed the pure splendor of the heavens before. I've only seen the ceiling of the world as a useless pinch of color between the trees and buildings, something to watch warily for an indication of the next day's weather. A cloud in the west meant rain would soon soak through the rushes of the roof and turn the dusty floor of my shop to mud. A wind from the south meant the hot breath of Gehenna follows to dry up the glue pots, turn all my shavings to tinder, and make the sheep and fellow villagers irritable.

Hungrily, my eyes trace the grayish smudges on the enormous white orb. The spots seem to form written words. But, as is the case with most of my people, I can't read what they might say. I understand that there are Secret Characters that make up my Creator's Name, but don't know Their Shapes. I have never seen Them or heard Them uttered. Such Knowledge is the sole province of our higher priests. The scribes read to us in synagogue so we may memorize the specific passages they wish us to learn. In these brief and jumbled excerpts the Sacred Name has been substituted by the word "Lord." Blasphemously, I wonder what if The True Name is being

spelled out for me in my loneliness. I tinker with the fantasy that even though I'm not in this desert on a quest for spirituality, the Most High sees me and wishes me to understand Him anyway.

According to the holy writs I should be struck dead where I lay. Actually, I'm surprised I'm still alive anyway. I fully expected to expire during the first week. Well, honestly, I *hoped* I would. I had caught a bad cold from my evening drenching in the Jordan and ran quite a high fever. After I left Judas and the wailing throng I stubbornly kept moving forward, following the Jordan south, walking the forty miles to the Great Salt Sea in two days. I kept the coast line of that great puddle of liquid salt in sight for another day until I came to the Kidron River. I soaked there for a couple hours in the cool, flowing water calmly reconsidering if I truly wished to continue my plan for self-extinction before grimly rising to continue south-east into the wasteland. On the outskirts my feet pushed holes in the loose sand. The caustic grit rubbed the skin off my ankles. Every step forced me to expend great effort merely to pull my feet back out of the clutching dirt. I stumbled a good number of times, usually landing on my chin in the coarse powder. Finally I passed all obstacles to reach the sea of blasted rock that is the Wilderness of Judea. I wandered for another half-day with no clear aim until I discovered a slight indentation under an curved outcropping that looked inviting. Here I sit and wait.

The need for food stopped badgering me after three or four days. I must admit the towards the end of the last even John's honeyed hoppers would have been welcome. Each morning I lick a faint film of dew from the arching stone wall behind me with a cracked, dust-dry tongue. Maybe tomorrow I'll resist the burning thirst and won't. It might hasten the process which has lasted far longer than I feared.

It is a sin in Israel to die by your own hand. The August Creator wants His works to

continue to struggle until He is ready to take them. Those who are left behind are to strive all the more for those who are collected too early. I am a man, far past the age when my actions have become my sole responsibility. I cannot begin to pretend, say, that I am an unwanted girl-child who may, according to the Italian law, be left outside to die from exposure. It also would be a falsehood to feign a devotion I do not feel and say that I came to this sacred, devastated land as many before me to make a blessed connection with my Divine Ruler.

It is my duty to get up and walk to where I might eat and drink and once again grow healthy. It is also my obligation to take a wife and build a large house in Israel. But here I lie, because I will not. And so I sin. I refuse my Holy Master His Will. I wonder if it is for this sin that I have already been punished for so long.

I hope it will be recognized by the Hallowed Judge Above and counted to my credit that I did travel far enough away so shame will not be visited upon my family. In our land, at the very center our close-knit culture, is the unspoken, unwritten, but no less than adamantly adhered-to rule that any infraction or misfortune that is known to one member of a family portends a very likely possibility of repetition for all. The status of my brothers and sisters has only begun to recover from the stain of my previous hardships. The circumstances rather than, as my mother's contends, my fussiness have kept the town's women away from my wedding bower had I been interested.

But I'm not.

Not even a little bit.

The stars! They are so lovely. So many and so bold! White sparks flung across the darkness. They burn with the brilliant passion of all lovers who ever were or will ever be. They blur into one through my tears. I didn't think I had enough moisture left to cry.

“How are you feeling?” the man standing over me inquires in a whisper.

I peel my eyelids apart and look at him. He reminds me of my next younger brother. His beard is a bit longer. There is a sadness, a careworn look around his mouth and eyes with which madcap James could never be marred. I sit up with effort. He doesn't move to aid me. He retreats close to the corner of the rock as if I had the strength to harm him. “James?” I ask anyway to be sure. My voice is thick in my throat.

“No, I'm not James, though you and I are brothers of a sort,” the man says soothingly.

“Do I know you?” The words are difficult to form as my tongue is swollen.

The man is quite disconcerting. He keeps moving in a semi-circle a fixed distance from me. My eyes have difficulty focusing on him, he's weaving and bobbing so, not swiftly but smoothly and constantly, much like he's dancing.

“Sometimes. Not too often.” He sidles across to my left.

“Would you hold still, just sit somewhere. You're making my head ache. I won't hurt you, I promise. I'm not really able to do you any injury even if I were so inclined, which I'm not.” It takes a long time to get this out but he watches me patiently as I speak.

“Sorry. Old habits. It's rather expected of me.” He sits on a rock and a puff of dust bustles up about him. He waves it away with his hands and sneezes.

“By whom?”

“Pardon?” He looks at me.

“Who expects it of you?”

“Your people. Israelites.”

“Why?”

“I don’t really know. They just do. Good question though. Mind if I keep you company for a bit?”

“Not at all. It might be pleasant to have someone to talk to.”

“Same here.”

We sit looking at each other. Minutes drag on, pass, one after another.

“Horrid weather we’re having,” he says finally, stifling a yawn.

“Blistering hot days, bitter cold nights.” I agree. “Pretty consistently awful.”

“Yup. Say, you never answered my question.”

“What was it?” I try to remember. It’s nearly morning, and the last star is bright on the horizon. I wonder if today will finally be my last.

“I asked, ‘How are you feeling?’”

“I’m dying far too slowly. Every bit of me hurts. Otherwise, everything’s just Jake.”

“That’s terrible!”

“Please, if you’re going to lecture me, you can leave.”

“Well, it’s not in my nature to point out moral failings. I meant it as merely . . . commiserating.”

“It’s a sore subject of late.”

“I can understand that. So are you the messiah?”

“I don’t remember much scriptural support for the messiah killing himself in the desert. Of course they never read us the whole scrolls.”

“No, it’s not there, but if you were the messiah you’d think that your God would save you from self-annihilation, maybe by turning these rocks into cupcakes or muffins.” He holds out a stone and for a fraction of a second it looks like a bagel. I can see the sesame seeds and

everything. The man smiles and tosses it over his shoulder. My eyes follow it as he continues, “Your God did give His manna to Moses and the tribe when they took forty years to travel that short two hundred miles across the desert.”

“I never thought of Him that way.” I force the smell of warm bread from my mind. My mouth tries to moisten.

“Pardon?”

“The Omnipotent Composer of the Whole World. I have never thought of Him as ‘God’. Other peoples have gods which all tend to be anthropomorphic sprites dedicated to some small, specific tasks like hunting antelope. They shape their gods like beautiful boys with brown flowing hair and wise old white-maned men, both with long beards. Our Divine Creator encompasses all. He is so far beyond your term as to render it meaningless. He has no form that the human mind can hold. He generously gives us of His Love. This suffices for my people. His Love sustains us more than any food.” I dry swallow my reemerging hunger.

“I can tell from your ribs and knees poking out that you are just one heavy receiver of all this love,” he says sardonically.

“I have been in the past. I know what it is like. Having the Love taken away has withered me inside more than weeks without food. I’m just letting my body catch up.”

“So you’re not disappointed that your Almighty Sovereign has ignored you?”

This salvo stings. I can’t deny that I have hoped for a reconciliation, a return of The Beauty of His Regard, but realize my worth, my importance in the Great and Holy Plan must be so minor as to be laughable. “Why should I be? If I jumped off the top of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem right there where He resides should I expect that He would keep my bones from being crushed in the Kidron Valley? My Hallowed Emperor of All Things didn’t create me to push

and prod Him for His Love but to enjoy It, if and when It comes to me.”

“So you don’t want to be the messiah?”

“I don’t think it’s a question of want. The chosen one will be selected for his destiny. He won’t be the one deciding.”

“But what if you could be?”

“What do you mean?”

“I could make you into one.”

“I don’t think you are talking to the right person at all.”

“I think I am.”

“Why me?”

“Because you consider everything on many levels, you have much compassion for all men, even those strange to you, and you can see outcomes as if they had already happened. The man I need must possess this crucial traits in order to complete the task I propose.”

“I’m not him.”

“Hear me out for a bit. Let’s just consider the possibilities. If you were the messiah think of all the things you could do. I’m quite good with advice. I could give you piles of suggestions to fulfill any ambitions you might ever have. It would be child’s play for me to help you subjugate the entire world under Israeli domination, bring glory to your family, not to mention all the wealth and as much worldly love as you could stand. All you need to do is follow what I say and three years tops you’ll be ‘Emperor Jesus.’ I can’t think of anything I’d have you do that you’d object to either.”

“I’d prefer to listen to the Small Warm Voice of My Holy Spiritual Mastermind when He talks to me from inside.”

“Is that what you are doing now? Is what I’m offering all that different from your present course? At least with my way millions of your people will benefit from being free of pagan rule. Even the pagans will gain from being forced to worship your Master. Nobody profits from your death here, least of all you.”

I look at him. He smiles and holds out his hand. He asks me an unexpected question, one I’d been too foolish to ever consider, and everything changes.

Leaving the wasteland is much harder than entering. I’m barely able to sustain forward motion. My flesh is burnt tight against my bones and doesn’t want to continue moving. But I will not stop. I cannot quit. I must live and make my life something it has never been. I have learned a painful lesson in the desert and it has become all important to me to share that knowledge with others. So much suffering will have been wasted if I were to die now; everything would have been a meaningless. I can’t let this happen. Though I’m unsure of my direction I keep pushing on in the direction of the setting sun. When the surging noise of the Murabba’at River fills my ears I thank My Heavenly Father for once again returning my love. I drink in the sweet water and rightly give Him praise.

04 — ON THE SHORES OF THE LAKE OF GALILEE

A dream of the desert, heat and sand, every inward breath a hot knife into the chest, every exhalation a small surrender of moisture, of life. Memories of it still visit my sleep often enough. In the darkness, waves from the Lake of Galilee chortle between the rocks. A mild breeze caresses the fine hairs of my beard. It is very late; dawn hours and hours away. Clouds are a gray scrim over most of the stars. I wonder what has awakened me blessedly, but abruptly, back to reality — if I can believe anything is real after what I have been through. I hear noises: a grunt, the hiss of a curse, the shuffle of footsteps on loose shale. I can't see anything in that direction though my head snaps to and fro, searching in wide-eyed terror. A blurred furious motion charges from the blackness. A sandaled foot catches me just beneath my ribs, kicking away the wind to protest. A body falls across me. The smell of sour wine and spoiled fish crush me. I push against the weight, my fingers buried in coarse, sopping wet cloth, but I'm still very weak even seven months after my ordeal. A hand awkwardly cuffs my temple. The darkness becomes fuzzier for a moment. spurts of light paint my vision. From the end of the body erupts the sound of choked vomiting. I cover my face with my free hand until it subsides. Then, as if it was a natural progression, there is the noise of huge wracking sobs.

I reach my hand up to feel a hump in the middle of his back. I reach passed the hump to his thick neck that is covered with sweat-soaked, tangled, and knotted hair. I stroke the neck gently and the bunched muscles loosen. The man curls himself under my arm, leaving a smelly trail of drool across my chest. He weeps for a while in his sleep before his sounds turn to snores.

The damp breeze reaches me from the Lake, perfumed with the sweetish bouquet of sea lilies. I shiver. Soon I doze. Soon I sleep and without dreams.

In the morning armies of pismires with sharp wee feet are on furious march beneath the skin of my arm. The stranger is sitting up glaring at the clusters of mist swirling over the chop of the pre-dawn lake. He's *huge*, almost as big as Baba, but where Baba's all jelly this man is a veritable tree. His face is purple, pink, and yellow with bruises. His nose is swollen and crooked on his face. His tongue laps repeatedly at a sizable jagged gash in the corner of his puffed-up lip. I flex my fingers and try to shake the crusts of scales and . . . other matter from them. He breathes in through his nose, makes a noise in his throat, and spits a tooth into the weeds four feet away. He doesn't make any other sound, but his eyes squint at the pain the spitting caused his lip.

"I was going to kill you. Figured you must be a thief laying in wait for an honest fisherman." he says matter-of-factly.

"Is anything of yours missing?" I ask.

"No. That's why you're still alive."

"What if you had just accidentally lost something?"

"Then you probably would've had it coming anyway. Everybody does." His voice is like grindstones turning pebbles to powder.

“That’s terrible, thinking that way.”

“Why?”

“Because you can see everyone in the world as basically honest or you can see them as basically wicked. How you see them doesn’t change them, but it does change you.”

“That *sooo* stupid. I was wrong. You ain’t a thief. You’re a crazy man. I shoulda killed you anyway. Just for general purposes.” He means to frighten me. I can easily recognize a bully. I’m the son of one, but this guy has a *long* way to go before he’s as seasoned at it as my father.

“What’s stopping you?” I ask with an insouciance I don’t really feel.

“Phegh! — Urk.” He lightly touches his bleeding lip. The making a sound of scorn hurt him enough to force him cry out. I crawl over to in front of him. My fingers have some feeling again. “My, you are a sight. What happened to you?” I meet his eyes with a stern, steady look.

“Got in a small tussle with some drunken legionaries. Eight. Less than six I can usually handle no problem. More than seven is always a little tougher.”

I try to remember what Mar taught me about these kinds of injuries. I wonder how she, Laz, and Little are. I miss them. I probably never should have left Bethany, but I was too restless to stay in one place, and I had been filled with a strong urge to see the Lake. I also yearn for sight of something — well — someone else. I examine his wounds.

“I know something about healing. I’d like to fix you up. Please? May I?”

“G’ahead.” he growls. In his hate-filled glare I see something else, something softer, not fear, or gratitude for kindness, or respect that I stood up to him, but perhaps *something* alloying them all. Maybe it was just his pain, not just the pain from his injuries but a deeper, inner suffering that may match my own. I feel a kinship, a brotherly connection. He must sense it too

as his eyes look away in embarrassment.

I grasp the nose first and wrench it back into place. He slugs me in the stomach in the same place he kicked me the night before.

“I was trying to help you.” I rasp when I can grasp a breath to speak with. I’m on my butt in the grass several feet a way.

“I know, but it hurt just the same.”

“That was the easy one. Your lip needs a couple, three stitches to heal properly. Do you think you can show me how tough you are and refrain from hitting me while I put them in?”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“You’re a fisherman. You have a needle?”

He twists away from me, furtively paws around in a kid-skin pouch tied to his belt, and pulls out a fish-bone needle the length of my little finger. He hands it to me.

“Is this the smallest you have?” I ask. It’s fairly thick around.

“Uh-huh.”

“It’ll have to do.” His beard below his lip is a matted mess of blood, puke, and wine. I dip the corner of my robe in the Lake and daub the worst of it loose so that I can see the laceration better. I prize a thread from the hem of my robe and guide it through the eye of the needle. “Brace yourself. Grab on to your ankles and will yourself not to let go. Prove to me what you are made of.” I slide the needle into his bashed-up flesh. His eyes tear, but he stays still. I want to watch the bunched muscles of his shoulders for movement but realize I must concentrate on what I’m doing. After three lines of flax lace his lip I make a small knot and tell him it’s finished. We both resume breathing at the same time.

“I’m Simon,” he rasps, “son of John, the Gruff Fisherman.”

“I’m Jesus, son of Joseph, the Angry Carpenter.” We grasped arms and shook.

“That was . . . kind of you.” Simon mentions shyly.

“Think nothing of it. Why did you get in a fight anyway?” I ask.

“I didn’t like the way one of them looked at me. It was just his unlucky day. I was pissed that my fishing partner, Tobias, quit on me. Tobias said I had a bad temper! It was his own fault I got upset. He made a rude comment about my brother Andrew running off to follow some idiot from out of the desert. Okay, it’s true, but I don’t want to hear about it. Now how am I supposed to support my family? Zebedee will probably fire me. I should find Tobias and pummel him a good one.”

“You work for Zebedee?”

“Yeah, he has the tetrarch’s piscary for most of the Lake. He sub-lets this cove to me.”

“What’s a piscary?”

“Are you simple too, Crazy Jesus? It’s a Royal Right to Fish. Shit. It looks like good fishing weather too. They always rise to feed just before a storm. Even you must be able to taste it.” He smacked his lips carefully. I inhaled deeply. The air did have the tang of rain in it.

“Maybe I could help?” I offer carefully.

“Why, do you know a fisherman?” Simon eyes me sharply.

“No, I was thinking that maybe I could learn.”

“A sack of sticks like you? You couldn’t haul enough to eat!”

“I used to be very muscular. I could be again, given a chance.”

“I guess you’d be better than nothing, though not by much. Let’s be about it, if we’re going to do it, before I change my mind.”

We walked along the shore until we come to an open boat piled with nets. A dense cloud

of flies swarm over the slimy mesh. The boat is twelve feet long and a third as wide. It is poorly constructed from very thick planks and covered with pitch. I examine the way the builder joined the sections and found them wanting.

“Jump in.” Simon commands.

I hop into the boat, slip in a pool of entrails, and land into an untidy heap in the bilge water. Simon sniggers so hard I’m sure he’d rip his stitches loose. “Sorry, sorry fisherman you’re going to be, I can see. You’d better shape up quickly or I’ll chop you up for chum.” He grunted and shoved the heavy craft off the sand. Lethely for such a huge man he swings his body into the back of boat. We drift twenty or so feet from shore. He seats himself on the rear bench and hands me a pair of oars. “Here, I’m the captain; you’re crew. You row.”

“How?” I ask.

“You’ve never rowed before?”

“No. Haven’t even seen it done, I’m afraid.”

He sighs and tosses me overboard. I desperately flail for a bit. Water gets up my nose. He pulls on a cord and plucks a pottery jug sealed with a waxed wooden plug from the Lake. He takes a large gulp of sour wine, carefully replaces the plug, and tosses the jug back in the water too near my head. Then he reaches over and yanks me back onto the boat, plunking me in the stern.

“Had to chuck you overboard. No room for us to get around each other on this scow.”

I huffing to gather my breath. “You could have warned me.”

“Stuff happens suddenly on the water. You gotta be prepared. You don’t swim?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then you ought not get yourself into situations that you can’t walk away from.”

“Maybe I’ll learn to walk on water sometime.”

He laughs and with his immense arms pulls on the oars propelling us with speed out into the center of the cove.

Hours later we haven’t caught anything. Not even lunch. Simon has finished two jugs of wine and in a Very Bad Mood. I know this because he keeps grumbling it over and over. It feels like it’s going to pour any minute. I’m at the oars, clumsily pulling us in haphazard circles. We managed to change places with both of us staying in the boat. I’m achy and sweaty and fairly disconsolate. It’s hot out on the Lake. Not as hot as the desert, but hot none-the-less.

“I think you’re Bad Luck, Mr. Jesus.”

“What makes you say that?” I ask with a weak smile. The boat starts to spin left again. Simon slams his fist on the opposite oar and shoves it roughly, which immediately rights us. The oar handle slams into the large blister in the web of my thumb. It rubs me in a completely different place than my hammer or awl.

“Don’t argue with me when I’m in a Very Bad Mood.”

“Yessir.” I mumble. I turn my face away from him to hide my misery. A short ways over in the distance I feel a odd . . . tugging. I see a vision of flashing bronze and white along the surface of the Lake.

“May I row over to the other side?” I ask.

“Between the shoals? Why?”

“Because I think there’s fish there.”

“How long have you been a fisherman?”

“Five or six long, wretched hours.”

“And all of a sudden you’re Jonah.”

“I know we’ll catch something.” I repeat firmly. “I’ve always had . . . feelings about things. Hunches that turn out right. Trust me, please.”

“Oh, all right, row over there if you can. But I warn you, if you hang us up on one of those sandbars I’ll leave your body on it for the sea kites.”

“Okay.” I gulp and tug on the oars with renewed strength. The boat glides across the low waves. On either side of the boat I glimpse greenish-yellow hummocks of sand. I make my way carefully through them. Suddenly there is a dragging tug from the net at the back of the boat. The craft nearly stops short.

“Now you’ve done it! You’ve fetched the net up on a log or something. Grrr. I’d like to know how you’re going to pay for this, you ninny.” He yanks hard on the net lines to free it from the obstruction. A few strained feet of the net rises from the water.

“Bend your knees and pull up that way,” I suggest. “Don’t strain your back.”

Simon snarls but follows my advice and gives a massive jerk. A roiling charge of fish leap from the net into the bottom of the boat. Simon is so surprised he lets go of the line. Immediately he loses his balance. His arms pinwheel in the air for a moment before he topples into the Lake. I reach for him, but he shouts, “Leave me be, hold on to the net!”

I manage to capture the free end and hang on to it until Simon can clamber back into the skiff. He then scoops the fish out of the net with a sloppily carved, wide wooden trowel. The trout slam and wriggle about our shins. Simon whoops with glee even after a down pour of rain starts to pelt us from the heavens. After the last fish is aboard, in the middle of a squall, arms on each other’s shoulders we dance in place, rocking the narrow boat almost to the point of capsizing it, yelling out our joy.

“Sorry I had so little faith. I won’t be surprised when you do walk on water.” Simon shouts about the torrent.

“That’s okay.” I shout back. “I’m glad it worked out.”

“Simon, looks like you had a good haul,” a plump, balding man with a tax collector’s brass plate hanging from a chain around his neck calls down to us from the shed overlooking the fish-monger’s wharf. We are just finishing unloading our catch into a wooden scale. The fish-monger makes a tick on his wax coated tablet for every hod we fill. After each tick he and Simon grunt at each other in agreement.

“I don’t know, Matthew, I’d say it was about average for me and my new partner.” The sun has just set. The sky is again clear. In the east, on the far side of the Lake, lights are visible from the city of Bethsaida. We are still damp from the rain but it feels good to be so clean. With a smile, Simon’s face looks fairly human.

The fish-monger counts out drachmas into Simon’s hand. He stops short, but Simon points at the tablet and the fish-monger doles out two more.

“So are you ready to pay your temple tax? I’ve been waiting very patiently for almost a month.” Matthew has six legionnaires with him. They look to be in worse shape than Simon. They nervously finger their oversized cutlery.

“Of course, Matthew. I was going to come see you straight away. How are your buddies feeling today?”

“Much better than the two in the infirmary with broken bones. It seems they were marching down the road after quietly socializing at the pub when a wild bull ran them all over.”

“Really! Much the same happened to me. Only I’m sure it was a bigger bull.”

“Quite a lot of bull, I’ll wager,” Matthew remarks dryly, “Now about your tax?”

Simon grudgingly hands Matthew two coins. Matthew jingles them in his hand before turning to me. “What’s your name? Have you paid your tax this month?”

“I’m Jesus. But I don’t have any money right now.”

“That’s too bad. Perhaps you’d like to discuss it with my associates.” He nods to the burly soldiers.

“Here, I’ll pay.” Simon interrupts. “Finding Jesus was like finding a fish with a coin in his mouth.”

“So you’ll both be on time from now on?”

“Of course.” Simon assures him.

“Good.” Matthew purrs. He has the air of a much pampered cat.

“You’ve got a scale on your cheek.” I point out.

He laps the back of his hand and smooths it over his face.

“Did I get it?” he asks.

“Yep.” I answer.

Simon leads me to his house. We both carry sacks filled with the better trout. Simon has three jugs of wine in a mesh sack besides the one he keeps tipping from. We purchased them on the way. The cottage is dark. Simon leans through the doorway. He touches the mezuzah and kisses his lips. “Hallo the house! I’m home.”

“Oh rapture, oh joy, oh bliss.” retorts a snide voice.

“My mother-in-law.” Simon explains. “Don’t pay any attention to anything she says.” He stumbles around in the dark and locates the flint and steel. He gets some shavings to catch in the hearth and stacks some dry twigs on top of the smudge. In the dim, flickering illumination I

see an elderly woman lying rigidly facing the wall.

“Don’t expect me to cook your supper. You left me alone for three days. I’ve taken ill. Yes, with a terrible fever. Don’t you feel guilty now? You’d better. All your fault. An old woman all alone. I’m so sick. Father Abraham would take me, but I’m too ill to even die. Burning up. Yes. If my Keziah could only see how you mistreat me she would leave you in an instant. She would desert your house in Israel forever. Yes. And she would be correct in doing so. Feh! I can smell the wine on you from here. Out drinking and Magnificent Lord of Hosts knows what else. Unclean, uncaring, unspeakable man.”

“Keziah’s dead. She perished trying to give me a son.” Simon hisses in her ear. “I would be in my rights to turn you out in the streets for the grief you give me but I don’t for the love I yet carry for her. Be still; we have company.”

The old woman spins swiftly and glares at Simon, “So you have brought a witness to your shame?” With wild, angry eyes she looks me over. “I know you. You’re the magician that pulled the trick with the wine at Zebedee’s son’s wedding.”

“What trick with wine?” Simon asks.

“He made it out of water. Has he ensorcelled you? How interesting!”

“I heard about that wine. Why did you let me buy this swill is you could make some good stuff?”

“It was only a misunderstanding. I didn’t really make wine. I bought it.”

“Mama’an, you know what he did today? He called out to the fish, and they all jumped in the boat.”

“Next you’ll tell her how I walked on water.”

“You can tell me. I can keep a secret,” Mama’an says earnestly. She leaps out of bed

and takes the heavy bags from Simon's shoulders. "Tell me your shaman stories while I'll make you boys some supper." She looks in the bag. "Oh, the most perfect trout I have ever seen. Such a feast we will have!"

"I thought you were ill?" Simon points out.

"Oh, um, he cured me." She takes his hand and puts it against her forehead. "See. Fever's gone. Cool as a stone."

"It's true; she is." Simon says winking at me. "And my face doesn't hurt as much any more." She looks at me with an awestruck grin.

I smile back and shrug.