

**A**s I write those words, “Tonight we arrive in Magdala,” I cannot help but shiver, and it is not because of the cold stone on which I sit in this library.

I warm myself by thinking of the day you arrived in Magdala, Jesus, so many years later. From the start you did everything wrong.

From the beginning, Jesus, you broke all our rules, broke them open and savored their sweet juice.

That bright morning of Shavuot eve, I was still the picture of a dutiful priestess of Magdala, a grown woman working at my loom, putting the finishing touches on Our Great Mother Goddess Astarte’s sacred garment. To the outer eye, surely I appeared focused on weaving the white linen tunic before me, in the cool shade of the balcony, in rhythm with my partner of wood and leather and rope and clay. This tunic was seamless, as were all the clothes we made here – that was our specialty. The threads of pure linen flew between my hands, and the clay weights clinked in a rhythm that had long since merged with my own breath, merging too with the song of Salome’s loom right behind mine, her supervisory position now only symbolic.

Anyone could think I was simply preparing for an ordinary Shavuot, the Festival of Wheat, when the Valley folk would come and bring us some of their first harvest of figs and wheat. Only my new friend Joanna knew that I had been weaving this fine linen tunic to wear for our ritual, yours and mine. For the past year, Joanna had been carefully, tenderly restoring my faith in the possibility of you, teaching me how to draw you to this day, after all the years of waiting

and then the years of giving up waiting. For twelve moons I had done all the magic I knew to lure you down from your mountains, wondering all the while at the wisdom of cracking the comfortable husk of my resignation.

Across the courtyard, nestled against the external stone wall of the kitchen to keep an eye on the oven's fire, Zanna sang as she always did to grind wheat into flour for the day's bread and more for the night's feast. The millstone nestled between her strong squatting legs, her two brown hands on the wooden handle, she turned the upper stone disk over the lower one. She stopped periodically to pour grain through the hole in the center, in time with her song's chorus. Her rhythm was so steady she set the pace of my weaving, of the whole morning.

I could hear Zanna's daughter Abigail accompany her mother's song as she swept the balcony above the gate, exactly opposite the great tree. She was careful not to send any pebbles or chaff onto the veiled heads of Elizabeth and Hannah as they emerged from the storeroom. Their bowls full of frankincense, their walk full of whispers, they crossed the dusty courtyard toward the spreading oak, their foreheads almost touching as they murmured, daughter stooping to meet mother.

Up in the shady cedar grove, Maryanna tuned her lute for the night's festivities, singing a high clear note at exact intervals with Zanna's song, pulling an increasingly clear sound from her instrument. Tabitha, grown from simple child to simple woman, assisted Maryanna with an occasional harmony, as usual her mind half on the intricate embroidering in her lap, half inside herself as if listening to other voices.

One of the white doves that shared our human nest flew out from under the barn's roof to the flowing fountain in the middle of the courtyard, took a drink from its central spouting pillar, rested a moment on the edge of the wide basin and took off again, likely to its daytime roost in the woods beyond the grove.

Our Zanna was the first to see you cross the gate into the compound. The rhythm of her mill stopped, as did her song. That

silence followed by her shriek of delight, alerted us all, turned our heads in the direction of her run.

Abigail remained motionless on the balcony. Salome's loom went silent behind mine. Elizabeth and Hannah appeared at the threshold of the oak's shade. We took in your commanding gait with a single eye.

My heart raced – the sight of you – the crashing realization that our prayers had worked, the more devastating one that my hardened shell of outrage-turned-to-apathy could fall away in an instant, after seventeen long years, revealing me naked, shining.

Zanna grabbed you with both arms, stopped your course mid-courtyard, and patted your high wide shoulders, "Jesus my boy! Look at you big grown man! Look at you!"

You rested your hands lightly on her arms, saying, "And you Zanna, you have not changed one bit!"

"Foolishness! I am an old woman now! But you! Why did you not tell us you were coming! Nothing is ready for such a visit. Have you traveled all night? You do well to arrive on the eve of Shavuot, the festival of the wheat, you yourself are a tall ripe stalk of wheat!"

Your mother Maryanna flew down from the shade of the grove, her cloak falling off her head as songbirds flew from her mouth, "My son my son my son!" Maryanna took your offered hands. "Why did you not send a herald? Speak to me my son!"

"It is good to find you so well, Mother."

Maryanna's song-words drew the rest of the women near. Joanna emerged from the deep belly of the scroll room, ran to me and kissed my cheek in her excitement. Then she joined all the others who rushed to the spot where you stood. All except me – I had been stilled by Salome's ringed hand on my shoulder as she rose to greet you.

After nodding courteously to the gathering women, you walked deeper into the courtyard and paused at the flowing fountain. I watched your approach, sensed your men's palpable presence outside the gate.

On your shoulders rested the sun-drenched midnight blue cloak I had sent you, into which I had woven all my prayers. I turned to face

you directly and found, under your dazzlingly white headscarf, your sparkling dark gaze.

From ten paces away, your slice of a grin could have stilled the wind. You rested against the stone lip of the fountain's basin. I drank in your sinewy brown arms crossed in front of you, your outstretched legs, your thickly-sandaled feet, pale from dust.

You looked nothing like the tender boy who touched my hand seventeen years before – how could you – nor like the other mountain men who brought down the wounded for healing, with their chest out, hair wild under their tattered headscarves, thick scarred hands on their jutting hips.

Eight counts I breathed in, eight counts held, eight counts exhaled, as Hannah had taught me.

Abigail arranged welcoming and restorative servings in the shade outside the kitchen, across the courtyard, and then brought a bowl to wash your feet. Did you not see her, as you had not broken eye contact with me since you gained it? Had you not heard your mother and Zanna tell you of the greeting being prepared for you?

Without rising from the edge of the basin, you unlaced your sandals and swung your legs over, immersing your dusty feet and calves into the cool flowing water. You removed your headdress, let it fall to the ground, revealing hair like mine, knotted and dark, tumbling down past your shoulders. You rolled up your long sleeves and, cupping the clear water in your broad dark hands, you splashed your face and throat, over and over again.

Only a few of us had ever seen a man bathe, definitely never in broad daylight, and most certainly not in public. You noticed the silence and turned, took in the stunned faces around you. Your bright laughter splashed out like the water you playfully sprayed on your mother and Zanna, who replied with surprised giggles and wasted no time in splashing back, until everyone joined in. Tabitha seemed to be drinking as much water as she was throwing, laughing so hard she could not close her mouth. Even Abigail entered the fray, though she was still shy after all these years, still not certain of her place. But you saw this and splashed her the most, until everyone was wet with

mid-morning water and mirth.

Everyone but me. Everyone except Hannah and Elizabeth. I had actually forgotten about them. Hannah emerged from the great oak's shade and stopped, her wizened gnarled frame vibrant with dignity, and Elizabeth behind her, a tall shadow. Maryanna sensed them with the eyes on the back of her head and turned and suddenly you were all guilty children.

Pearls of light hung in your black-as-night beard while Hannah advanced on her three legs, two flesh-and-bone and one carved wood, shuffle and step, shuffle and step. The compound's unfamiliar daytime silence baked in the heat. No one but she moved. Not even Elizabeth, who stood motionless a few steps from the tree. Even the air was still, lending no breeze to press Hannah's stray white locks to the blue cloak pulled over her head.

Our most holy high priestess did not speak nor stop until she reached the basin, and you turned to face her. To our high priestess you deigned to bow your playful sober head, so you did not see the clever strangeness of Hannah's smile as she winked at Tabitha behind you, who rushed into the back of your knees while Hannah pushed you into the water with unexpected strength. You must have heard Hannah's laughter like a tiny child's when you re-emerged, and the game was on again.

I longed to join in, and yet I could not move, and it was no longer for the shadow touch of Salome's hand still on my shoulder, Salome who now had one foot in the basin and was half-soaked.

You sensed me then somehow; you turned and your eyes settled into mine, moved down to my throat and sauntered back up again.

You stepped out of the water, walked toward me, you began to speak your first words to me, but this Hannah would not have. I should not have been out for you even to see. Hannah stepped out in front of you, between us. Maryanna's bird-song on one side, and on the other Zanna's wide motherly hand in yours, you were pulled from me toward Abigail's feast-in-the-making across the courtyard. As your body turned away from me, your head did not, you said right to me,

“Mary.”

My mouth fell open to see sunlight bounce off my name in your mouth, and then you were gone, forty long paces away, deep in the shade opposite me, where you and your men – whom Hannah inexplicably invited in – were offered three different mixtures of wine, four layers of rug to sit on, five different kinds of olives. When at last you sat and folded your legs under you, your back was turned slightly from me, but I could still see your smile crease the corners of your eyes when you turned to listen to your men.

Then Elizabeth dropped a veil from the balcony above my head, curtaining me off from all sights save my loom and the great oak beyond it. Salome returned to me and to her loom, Zanna began again her song at her mill, and the day returned to order, more shining, and buzzing than before.

The sound of my name in your voice like a dove cooing remained in my ear all day. It spread a heat, a lightness, a tension through my whole body, into my toes and fingertips, making me wish there was more of me into which this feeling could spread. I was taut as a drum.

Till night came, and your knock on my door, soft like thunder.