

## CHAPTER 13

### AN ITINERANT

Jesus was a wanderer, a walker wherever he went. His staff in his hand, his knees punching the front of his robe, he strode the lesser paths, never hurrying. At every small village he turned aside and spent time with the villagers. A day or two, five days, the Sabbath. He ate with them, slept wherever they offered the shelter, talked. Taught. Healed.

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"Do you dance, sir?"

"Dance? When there's good reason for dancing."

"My wife says that our little boy laughed today."

"That's a reason."

"Well, and six days ago he, my boy, I mean—our firstborn son, if it please the Lord—was circumcised."

"A wonderful reason! What about music?"

"Leah! Leah, come and sing for us! Clap your hands! Sing something fast!"

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Those who invited him into their houses were of every station in life: tenant farmers and their masters; the unlettered blacksmith *and* the scribe; centurions, tax collectors, goatherds; the widow, the grandmother, the child, the rabbi, the priest. Jesus accepted their invitations without regard to the power they did or did not have. He dealt with them all the same. That peculiar freedom of his caused a paradox of feeling within most breasts: he seemed at once sweetly accessible and altogether unknowable. For he came easily and easily held conversation with anyone; but he lacked all the signs by which people interpreted one another: he could not be placed into any single category, neither of class nor profession, nor sect, nor party, nor humor, nor creed. He didn't fit.

He loved the poor. He grieved with the landless and the dispossessed. He held their children close to his breast and kissed the crowns of their dirty heads. Never did he enter the greatest, richest cities of Galilee, Sephoris, or Tiberias. Yet he slept as readily on a wooden bed inlaid with ivory as on a pallet of straw. And while he ate dried figs with the peasant he would as cheerfully eat beef with the tax collector. There were priests in Jerusalem who refused to walk near the houses of Gentiles, for fear stepping on their dried, uncircumcised spit. Yet this Jesus of Nazareth willingly spent the entire Sabbath with Roman soldiers and Tyrian merchants.

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"Listen to this: he talked to Rahab."

"Rahab! Nobody talks to Rahab any more."

"I know."

"I don't let my children pass her house. Make them take the other lane."

"I know. But he talked to her when she'd snuck down to the well. Noontime, the heat of the day."

"Talked to the Man-killer?"

"Asked her for a drink of water."

"A drink of water!"

"Can you imagine?"

"Well, then he knew nothing of that widow's curse: five down one to go—if she can get that sad beggar to marry her, but she's losing wily ways, is what I say."

"No, but that's the wonder of the thing!"

"What?"

"That he did know about Rahab. Knew about each husband in turn."

"The fool. Looks like we got a number six in the bin."

"No, no, you don't understand. The wonder is that no one *told* him about Rahab. Neither had he met her before. Just bumped into her at the well, and *he* it was told *her* all the things she'd ever done—get it? And then she came running back to town shamelessly, all shamelessly, and beside that, happy! And I'm telling you: Rahab sounded like Miriam beating her timbrels at the sea, singing, carrying on, causing the rabbi himself to start dancing in the street. Oh, that Rahab! Still has some moves in her. Even I had to go on back to the well to meet that fellow, because she said she thought he was the Messiah."

"The Messiah? What's his name?"

"Jesus. From Nazareth."

"Ach! Sister, you've been snookered. Nothing good ever came from Nazareth—"

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Enigmatic, unfathomable, utterly free of polite conventions: in spite of the mystery—or, perhaps, because of it—this Jesus caused both love and trouble in the hearts of the people who encountered him. His mother watched the effect of his presence upon others, how the young, both male and female, would begin to gaze at him the way a bride will gaze at her groom upon his first arriving. In their eyes was a sort of astonished fulfillment: *This is it; This is what I've been waiting for*. Their faces radiated gladness, life, and purpose. A future!—which is hope. Whether Jesus recognized the adoration or not, he treated them quite the same as he had before, kindly, equably, calling them each by name, as wholly present to one as to any other, full of the knowledge of that one, though none might know him altogether.

But Mary saw in other people signs of being troubled—no, threatened—by her son. If Jesus said yes, they said no. If he affirmed something, they considered it a moral outrage. When, on a Sabbath, he and several followers walked the wheat fields, plucking kernels, rubbing them clean and eating them, these people condemned him for breaking the laws prohibiting work on the Sabbath—and the ferocity of their complaint suggested they thought he was destroying truth itself. What power they imputed to her son! It was a measure of his effect upon the hearts of those who met him, striking life into some, and in others the fear of disaster.

Village to village Jesus wandered, lifting his long staff like a lance lithe and tireless in his progressions. Earlier, when he had arrived in Nazareth, Mary was gratified to see that he carried a leather bag of tool; exactly as Joseph had done. By the time he left Cana, Nathanael was

carrying the tools; yet it was Jesus who used them when he saw the need. And he saw the need in Capernaum.

Among the young who adored her son, some always left the village of their births and followed him to the next village, and then the next. But one or two of these would soon begin to drag their feet. The farther they went from their homes, the more anxious they became. Even fifteen miles away, the world can seem an alien, dangerous place.

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"Master, can I ask you something?"

"Your name is not Elisha, is it?"

"What? No. I told you my name."

"Yes, yes. Your name is Grass."

"No. Why would you call me Grass?"

"What is it you want to ask me?"

"Well, okay. I want to follow you. Truly. I will follow you to—"

"Your name isn't Ruth either, is it?"

Master? I ... I'm a man. Not a woman."

"True. A very young man."

"Why are you—"

"Hush. What is it you want to ask me?"

"I. Will. I will follow you. Only, would you let me first go say farewell to my family back home?"

And Jesus said to the young man: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

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Even fifteen and sixteen miles away—not yet a full day's journey, walking—the world can seem an alien place. One and one, some turned and went back to their families.

But a few had chosen rightly. Home for these became a movable thing: no longer a shelter of wood and stone, but the wings of a person. A prophet and a teacher. Jesus. And the souls that stayed he called disciples. Philip was among these. Nathanael. Andrew. Thomas, a twin. And I. And, yes, Joanna too, the wife of Chuza, bringing with her both money to support us and her husband's blessing. She came, in fact, *for* him, who stayed behind to manage the estates.

Well, Joanna had loved Mary for more than half her life and was ever glad to be with her. But first in the wedding, and then in his response to the royal official from Capernaum, Joanna had discovered in Jesus a figure of such indisputable sufficiency and freedom that in his presence she felt like Sheba in the presence of King Solomon. Alert, relaxed, the son other sister Mary was beholden to no one, yet was open to everyone, offering each a steadfast eye and a listening ear—and this by his own sole choosing.

Moreover, as their wanderings brought the small group closer to Capernaum, people began to flow out of that little fishing village, seeking "Jesus of Nazareth. Where is he?"

They wanted to see him, perhaps to touch him.

"He healed Susanna's boy!" they said. "All the way from Cana! Even before his father got home the fever broke. And this is the truth! His father confirms it over and over: that the boy was healed at the very hour when Jesus *said* he was healed!"

And Mary, glad for Joanna's company: she, too, traveled with her son, though no "disciple," as far as she was concerned. When he was young she had been the teacher. She told him the stories. She taught him to pray. She nursed him on pure Jewish milk. More than anyone else, she'd been intimate with the baby, the boy, the youth. And now the man: though glad of them, she was not overwhelmed by the wonders he performed. Who else had pressed him into service? None but Mary. And already in Cana she knew that the official's son would be healed at a simple word from her Yeshi.

It delighted her that Jesus was coming into his own—and that she was there to see it happen. But *his* manner, his reaction to these wondrous beginnings, confused her. He did not match the satisfaction in her. There seemed in him no new emotion; no bending gratitude to God, his Father; no excitement of purpose; and surely no soaring glory.

Her son, in the moments when he sank into himself, moments his mother had long ago learned to notice and to read: her son, her Yeshi, seemed rather more melancholy than fulfilled.