

FIT FOR A KING

A Christmas Gift

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Joseph,
my weathered,
bushy-faced betrothed,

frantically stepped through the threshold of our home, scouring our simple living quarters for anything he was forgetting.

“I have the bedding...figs...bread and water... food for the donkey...and my papers for the census, Mary” he stuttered, patting his worn tan robe and cloak. A worried frown, like a Hebraic question mark, creased the middle of his forehead.

My mother, sitting silently on the floor by the table he had made, spotted his prayer shawl and slyly shifted her eyes back in his direction, winking at me on the way.

“As I was saying, Mary,” she said, raising the resonance of her smooth, strong voice, “I doubt that the high priest in Jerusalem prays half as much as the priest in this home does.”

Joseph raised his thin black eyebrows high in relief.

“Ah---my *tallit!*” he yelled. Arms outstretched, he hurried over to that beloved but soiled piece of fabric and kissed it like a child, placing it in the bag over his shoulder. “What would I do without...”

“Me?” mother inserted, pretending not to smile.

Joseph’s body relaxed, and he laughed out loud, a full, *true* laugh, for the first time in a long while.

“Yes, my dear Tahlia. Whatever would I do without *you?*”

I sighed, deeply relieved. The painful tension that had been between the two of them the last several weeks over Joseph’s decision to take me to Bethlehem had only recently broken, but as the time to leave had drawn near, the anxiety between them---and me--- had worsened. Mother’s hovering had irritated Joseph thoroughly, though he had refused the temptation to ask her to leave on at least two occasions. I, myself, had avoided her for several days, but for a different reason. I was desperate to keep myself from clinging to her as the time drew closer to my delivery. In my 15 years of life, Mother had been my anchor. When Father had died, she

had taught me how to grieve, how to go on, how to trust. And now *I* had to trust that it would not be my mother, my guide, to help me through these most confusing, exhilarating days of destiny, but this simple, strong-backed carpenter, 18 years my senior, who I was only beginning to know, now packing a donkey for me

to go to a place I didn't want to go to . . . but was

compelled toward.

Joseph's eyes fell to the bulbous form of my tunic, now tightly fitted, as I reached for my winter cloak.

"Mary, are you ready?" he asked tenderly, then, pointing to himself with sudden self-realization, stopped short and queried: "Am I?" He half-laughed and looked up toward heaven, a Jew making more of a statement than asking a question.

We both chuckled.

"I pray I am ready," I said below my breath.

Joseph walked over to help me stand to my feet, and I noticed the trembling in his hands matched my own.

“God knows what will come,” he said in near panic. As of late, he had been as pregnant with anxiety as I was with child.

“Yes, God *knows what will come*,” I said with a heave, looking at him with an assurance that surprised even me. He smiled out of the left side of his mouth, his beard just beginning to show a slight shade of gray along his chin.

I grimaced just a bit from an increasing spasm in my lower back, but that was not what my attention was centered on.

I spun around to look at Mother who sat silently against the wall alone, her lips pursed in a brave smile. My chest suddenly tightened and an involuntary mist showered my eyes. My mother.

How could I face this journey without her?

Sensing my thoughts, she slid behind me and took my arm, holding my left hand. The veins on the back of her hand were bulging and blue. Her slender fingers looked white as they gripped my shorter, puffy red ones. I couldn't tell if I was steadying her more, or she me.

“This will be as far as my journey goes with you,” she said with simple resignation. I held her hand more tightly. I felt like a child between the two of them, trying to walk.

“Before you go, I have a gift.” she said, moving toward a cupboard and opening it. She positioned her body in such a way that we couldn’t see what she was retrieving, then stood very still, until we heard her smother a slight cry. She took a deep breath and turned toward me with flickering, wet eyes.

I gasped. In her hands was a large square of baby-soft, pearl-white linen, and freshly woven strips to secure it. A swaddling cloth of the finest weave and fabric!

“Mother, however did you...?” I reached for the priceless piece and rubbed the stone-washed cloth between my fingers, inspecting the intricacy and weight of the weave.

“You made this, I can tell! How? When?” I asked, searching her face for some sort of clue.

“Remember those trips I made to Hadassah’s house?” she asked, teary with joy. “Look,” she said, pointing to the weave with her cracked nail. “It’s Egyptian flax---one hundred and forty in the warp and 64 in the woof. I

washed it 30 times, back and forth, up and down, so it would be soft like
lambs fleece...

to welcome our little lamb, Mary...

our **Messiah!**”

I trembled, overcome with the thought and the treasure. The reserve of tears I had been rather good at managing spilled down my cheeks and chin. I reached out for her, sinking into her as close as my pregnancy would allow.

“Mother,” I wept. “Linen. So expensive. So beautiful. How could you afford...?”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Joseph look at her and then down to the floor, his face flushing.

I let go and backed up from her, wondering at this apparent collusion. Mother shifted her gaze to Joseph then to me, looking me straight in the eye, her hand on her heart.

“When I found out about your condition, Mary, you know how unbelieving I was. The shame, the fear, my...” Her hand waved through the air to illustrate the mountains of unspoken emotion. “In my unbelief---and

considering your circumstance---I went to Joseph to release him from any obligation of a bride-price, hoping it might make a difference in his decision not to put you away.” She looked toward heaven, a beam in her eye, then toward Joseph, who stood still, his head bowed.

“But I did not know that the angel had just spoken to him in a dream!” she said jubilantly.

Joseph interrupted.

“Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, for what is conceived in her is from the

Holy Spirit, *”he declared,*

his voice resonating with a tone not his own.

I looked back at Mother, who was wide-eyed, and radiant.

“Mary, Joseph said to me, ---truly he did--- *‘I will not only pay you what we have agreed, Tahlia, I will pay even more for the honor God is giving me...of raising his son.’*”

Both of them were fixed on a memory that was bigger than either of them.

Mother took my face in her hands, and looked at me, vibrant with joy.

“Joseph gave me the means to make something grand for my grandson, Mary...swaddling, *fit for a king!*”

Overcome, I sank my face into the fleecy gift and kissed it, my tears absorbed by the precious snowy fabric. A faint scent of frankincense filled my nose. Mother gathered me to herself and put my face in the crook of her neck, as she did when I was a child, holding me close.

Joseph, sensitive Joseph, left us alone.

Suddenly the faith-filled, grown-up woman I had begun to know in myself vanished with Joseph as he left the room, leaving me in the skin of a round, shaking, disoriented girl, who wanted to stay right there, safe in those broad familiar arms.

I clung to Mother more tightly, whispering as if I were alone in the dark with only her.

“Mother... sometimes...I’m afraid...”

I felt her cheek nod up and down in understanding as her fingers swept away my tears.

“So am I, Mary.” Her voice splintered in several directions like a frayed green reed. There was a long pause as she held my face, and I felt her breathing pick up.

“I am afraid,” she stammered, “ that Joseph will not take care of you as well as I think I can. I am afraid that God will take you far away from this poor town so you can raise his son in a place of wealth and power, fit for a king. And...” she said as she turned her mouth to my ear, whispering, “I’m afraid that you, mother of God, will never again be the same Mary you are to me right now.”

I pressed my face into her soft neck, trying to comfort her, trying to understand it all, trying to submit in all my not-knowing to the God who knows all. There were no words for this place. We just stood, waiting, huddled together in the silence of the room until our breathing becoming more relaxed, and our tears were somehow put away in the cupboard in the kitchen.

Mother loosened her grip on my back and I stood up, sweeping away an intruding lock of hair from my forehead.

“There are many days until the child is due, ” I assured her with a hint of frantic hope. “I promise we will hurry, Mother. Of anyone, most of all, I would want you there, you know.”

She lowered her chestnut eyes just in time to keep the pools within from spilling over.

“That has been my greatest dream, my child,” she whispered.

I kissed her on the forehead and thanked her for my cherished gift as Joseph called from the doorway.

“Mary, the sun grows higher.”

I nodded in acknowledgement as Mother placed my woolen headdress on me, arranging my hair.

“You will be warm enough with this,” she said with a tug.

We held hands as she walked me out into the cold sun. The fierce Galilean wind swept the tassels from my shawl into a surprise, uncoordinated dance.

I felt strangely invigorated!

Joseph bent down in the dirt, his leg acting as a step for me to the donkey, a young colt borrowed from a friend in Nazareth.

“My bride,” he bowed, offering me his hand.

In that instant, I had to control my impulse to throw my arms around him. Instead, I held my hand to the side of his face, our eyes dancing as they met.

“Thank you, my husband.”

His broad smile formed in the crease of my palm, knowing my gratitude was for far more than the bend of his knee.

I snuggled onto the back of the beast, breathing a prayer of gratitude at not having to walk the 870 stadia to Bethlehem.

“Goodbye, Tahlia,” Joseph said as he reached for Mother with an unexpected embrace. “I will take care of her. We will not linger,” he promised.

“I know. Goodbye, my son,” Mother said with a trembling smile. “Remember, you carry a king...”

Without warning, from my perch on the donkey, I suddenly laughed out loud, a sweeping, *outrageous joy-wind* enveloping me as I remembered the angel’s words:

*“You will be with child, and
give birth to a son. The Lord will give him the
throne of his father, David, and his kingdom will
never end.”*

I had never felt more alive!

Joseph turned toward me with a triumphant smile and pulled on the bridle, leading the way toward the City of David. A few palm fronds flew from the trees and landed on the road ahead. I pulled my woolen cloak closer and tried to position myself more comfortably. The sway of the animal's backbone put pressure near the baby. An odd new tightening sent spasms through my body.

I turned around once more to see Mother's hand waving, her long fingers stretched outward, lingering in the winter air.

"God is with you!" I heard her voice sing.

I nodded in response, and smiled, comforted. Turning my face toward the wind, I spread the special cloth across my womb and bent over to warm my child.

"God is with me," I whispered to him...

and grinned.