

Traitor's Tree

The storekeepers were nearly asleep in the mid-afternoon heat when we set out from Bethany. Eleven unkempt fishermen, me and our teacher. The golden one. All the girls smiled at him. When *we* looked their way they would adopt the hundred mile stare. But he flirted with every one of them though I don't really think he was interested in girls.

He could win the peasants over. They thought his shit didn't stink. He had a few routines that kept us in gifts of food and wine. He lectured them, shouted at them and beseeched them. But they didn't really understand the spiritual stuff. No, it was always the cheap tricks that worked the best. Like the day he was teaching by the lake at Capernaum. Afterward, the local talent for exaggeration turned fifty into five hundred into five thousand. My late arrival with a sack of stale bread became a miracle. In a sense it was, it took me half an hour to convince the hook-nosed baker that I wasn't going to sell his stale bread myself.

By then we weren't talking. I'd had enough of his circus tent theatrics and bad humour. He ... well I dare say he found things that were objectionable about me. Sometimes the others noticed our unease.

Thomas asked, "what's up with you two?"

"Have you quarrelled?" asked Simon Peter.

"Lover's tiff," said James and they all laughed. James got away with it because he was the younger brother of Jesus. Often I was the target of their crude jokes. These

foul smelling fishermen had spent most of their lives sitting in a boat together on the Sea of Galilee until he asked them to follow him. I couldn't stand them sometimes.

After that we walked in silence for a long while in the hard unwavering sunlight. He walked at the front and we followed two by two. I tasted sand in my mouth and could hear nothing but crickets nestling in the grass by the side of the road. It was a good road, the Romans had fixed it up. We made good time to Jerusalem.

On the outskirts of the town we spied a fig tree from a distance. We were parched and hungry and seduced by its green luxury. We walked toward it in the hope of finding a succulent fig or two. As we came to the tree I realised we had forgotten that it was not the season yet for figs.

Simon Peter stating the obvious as always said, "Master it bears no fruit."

Our teacher's face became twisted with anger. More and more he seemed to be infected with bitterness at things that could not be changed, the pre-ordained way of things. Sweat erupted from his brow as he stood clenching and unclenching his fists, seething, before the hapless fig tree. I looked around and all of the fishermen's faces were frozen with fear. After his rage had percolated for a time he spoke to the tree as if it were his bitter enemy, "You will never again bear fruit."

I felt sick in the guts. I'd never known anyone capable of such anger. He shook his head and sprayed me with sweat. It stung my eyes and he looked at me accusingly, "What is it?"

I said nothing. He turned away from us and I felt as if he'd left us orphaned in a place of darkness.

Everyone shut up and we continued on to the centre of town. After a while James observed, “You were a bit hard on that tree back there weren’t you?”

I waited for Jesus to explode. Instead he said quietly, “It’s a traitor’s tree.”

James nodded as if that was a sensible answer.

In the evening we were the guests of honour at a dinner hosted by some followers of Jesus. They were a prosperous merchant family with many teenaged and grown up children. There were perhaps twelve or fourteen of them. We ate heartily and there was plenty of talk but I didn’t say much.

After the meal Jesus told them a story we’d heard before, the tale of the prodigal son. This story annoyed me. I didn’t see why the profligate son should be loved by his father at the good son’s expense. I don’t think the others understood it either. But everyone in the low-lit room listened intently, every word he spoke seemed to be imbued with many layers of meaning. Yet every word was simple and could be understood even by young children.

When he’d finished there was still some wine left and the party moved to a balcony at the back of the house. We reclined on a couple of long timber benches and smoked some hash. The night was warm and a spirit of reverie came over us as if we sensed it was the end of an age.

A young woman walked up to him carrying a small gourd. She had been seated at the other end of the table during dinner and I could not recall her saying anything.

She placed the vessel on the bench and stood before him. She was about twenty years old, generous at the hip and bosom. Her black hair fell in long dark ringlets and her wrists and ankles were decorated with gold bangles. He remained seated on the bench and she un-hooked the top of her outer tunic so that he could see her. Her inner tunic was made of fine cotton which clung to her breasts. He did not respond except to look.

“Do you have to drink from this suffering cup?” she asked with a plaintive tone to her voice.

He nodded and closed his eyes. Then he clutched her and rested his head against her bosom.

“It wasn’t my idea,” he said almost helplessly.

She picked up the gourd and held it above his head. Then she poured perfume from it over him. It was fine smelling and fused with the hash oil falling through the air in sticky, addictive waves.

She put the gourd on the ground and massaged the perfume into his scalp. He did not resist and his eyes remained closed as she loved him with her delicate fingers. After some time she knelt before him and poured some more perfume this time onto his feet. She lowered her head and rubbed the perfume into his feet with her lustrous hair.

She began to weep quietly and tears also fell from his closed eyes.

I watched on mute, stoned and paralysed with love for him.

The next morning was a fucker. The water ran out before I could have a wash – so much for Roman engineering. As we commenced our walk to the temple I was filthy and the early sun was already making me sweat. Golden balls, on the other hand, had looked fresh and clean earlier as she towelled his hair dry. I noticed a new intimacy between them and was poisoned with envy.

Most of us were feeling hungover and stopped at a roadside stall to have a ginger beer. Jesus kept on walking so we had to scull our drinks and then hurried to catch him up.

As we neared the temple we merged with a throng of dusty pilgrims from east and west. Like us they had been wandering and wondering not knowing when they would reach their final destination. We queued with them at the temple gate to pay to get in.

Taxes from the temple paid for Herod's army who lived in the barracks at Anton up the hill. Centurions were posted around the walls to make sure Herod's bounty didn't go astray. The Romans tolerated local religions as long as they honoured Caesar. They didn't believe in God anyway – money and sewers were what mattered to them.

We paid the temple tax, two Denari each, a day's wage for a fisherman. We entered the outer Court of the Gentiles which was a filthy bazaar. Traders sold animals for sacrifice at Passover. The air was filled with the smell of shit. There were other traders too, selling a sordid miscellany of wares.

To buy a paschal lamb you needed Jewish currency. The Roman coin imprinted with the image of Caesar could not be tendered for sacrificial offerings. To exchange Greek and Roman coin there was a phalanx of fat arsed moneychangers. They sat

behind their tables feigning disinterest and counting money with gold encrusted pudgy fingers. They could afford the luxury of boredom. The rate of exchange was fixed between the dealers and the temple authorities. Pilgrims from afar were routinely burned.

But Jesus knew all this, it had been going on for years. What made it any different as he walked through the bazaar that day I don't know. Maybe it was the sight of steaming turds and animals pissing which set him off. Most of the traders knew Jesus and knew well enough not to make eye contact. But a trader I didn't recognise, a hard leather skinned man, engaged our teacher's stare. They stood looking at each other for long enough that the entire room became aware of the tension. Everything stopped. The braying and bleating of the animals died away and the sound of a hundred deals was hushed. Both men were unblinking and transfixed.

Jesus said quietly, "You've turned my father's house into a den of thieves."

"Fuck you farm boy," he replied succinctly. He wasn't afraid of a god botherer from the backblocks of Nazareth. If he got a punch away it would be a widow maker, even for golden balls.

But Jesus had a way of controlling events when it suited him and he got in first. Suddenly he had hurled the trestle table that stood between them into the air spraying coins in all directions. Without waiting for it to land he barrelled the trader to the ground. Thomas, James and Andrew joined the assault.

The tabletop meanwhile cart-wheeled several times in space. My eyes followed the projectile as it hurtled back to earth and one of its corners punctured the neck of a hapless beast. A moan from the animal was followed by a spurt of blood. I looked

away to see Andrew and James had pinned snake face on the floor and Thomas was forcing Roman money into his mouth.

The man gargled helplessly but Thomas forced more coins into his mouth and asked him, "How do your profits taste?"

Jesus looked on briefly but appeared disinclined to help him and turned his attention to the animals now in riot. The air was filled with bleats and moans and squawks. There was a trader selling leather goods. Without a word Jesus plundered two leather belts from his stall and began to flay the backsides of animals that had not yet taken the chance to flee. James pulled Thomas away from the moneychanger on the floor and the eleven joined their master in herding the braying beasts from the temple courtyard.

I hovered at one side as this was going on. I was tired of his righteous indignation.

Caiaphas, the head priest, who had been watching from his own covert position, approached me with his entourage.

"Ah, it is Judas, the best friend of the garrulous Galilean," his tone was over friendly especially as I wasn't his friend. He looked at me sadly, "Can't you make him behave?"

I did not have a ready answer for Caiaphas and remained mute. A group of Roman sentries appeared as a result of the commotion. Their commander made eye contact with the head priest but he motioned them not to interfere.

"They say he is the king of the Jews."

“You say,” I replied.

“Come now Judas, I know you’re an intelligent man. *You* must see these outrages can’t be allowed to continue?”

“ ... won’t be allowed to continue,” chimed in one of his apparatchiks.

I shuddered as the truth became clear to me. It had been decided. The smart cunt from Galilee was a dead man.

“I can’t talk to you now,” I said. The commotion had died down as the last of the animals had been herded from the temple. I drifted back to the group who were now gathered around Jesus happy with themselves. As if they were soldiers after a victorious day of battle. Wankers.

Others too were now gawking at the man who had dared to disrupt the sacred commerce. The pilgrims had got more value for their temple tax than usual. They turned their eyes to this usurper of temple authority – our master.

He turned to the crowd and started to tell them a story. I hadn’t heard this one and became as transfixed as the rest of them. When he wasn’t angry, his voice was like a golden thread.

“There was a man who planted a vineyard. This vineyard he hedged and in it installed a winepress. He then leased it to some tenant farmers who had fallen on hard times. He sought no rent except a fixed percentage of the fruit at harvest time.

“At harvest time the landowner sent one of his servants with some oxen and a cart to the vineyard to collect his share of the grapes. The tenants beat the servant and took

the oxen and cart sending him packing. Thinking there had been a misunderstanding a second servant was sent with several offsideers. The rogue tenants hijacked them, took them to an empty amphitheatre and stoned them to death.

“Some days later, their bodies were found in a field. The landowner was perplexed. The tenants were people he had gone out of his way to help. He thought over it for a long time and decided to send his son to speak to them. The tenants knew that he loved his son and he reasoned they would understand that sending his son meant that he respected them.

“The tenants guffawed when they saw the son approaching the vineyard riding a donkey. When he arrived at the gate he was pulled from the animal. The tenants clubbed the donkey to death and the son was nailed to a tree in a remote place and died three days later from asphyxiation and exposure.”

The crowd listened in slack jawed wonder to this. Some of the women started to cry at the sadness of the story.

Caiaphas and his cronies also listened from a balcony off to one side of the court.

Jesus continued by asking the crowd a question “tell me what do you think the landowner should have done with these criminals?”

“Cut their fucking balls off!” volunteered one pilgrim.

“Crucify them!”shouted another. The crowd became noisy with indignation at the fate of the landowner’s son.

Jesus began to shake his head. The picture he had painted, all too well, was not having the effect he was aiming for. That was the problem really. These people were thick.

Caiaphas, however, was not and he knew perfectly well who the tenants were meant to be and who the son represented.

Jesus raised his hands to motion the crowd to be quiet.

“Have you ever read the scriptures where it says that the stone the church builders rejected has become the cornerstone and that this is the wish of God?”

That was enough for Caiaphas. He took the bait.

“Stop this,” he commanded from the balcony before making his way through the crowd to face Jesus.

“You are Jesus of Nazareth?”

“Yes.”

“A carpenter by trade.”

“My step father was a carpenter. I was his apprentice.”

“By what authority does a carpenter’s apprentice bastard come into this temple and seek to lecture us?”

“Better to be a bastard apprentice than a teacher of the law who wears fine robes and is honoured in the market places. Bastard apprentices don’t need the best chairs in the synagogue. Nor do they need to devour widow’s houses and make lengthy prayers to cover their tracks!”

The blood vessel on the head priest’s temple bulged but he managed to retain his composure. “They say you are the king of the jews, the messiah and the son of god.”

“You say.”

“But *you* say we have turned *your* father’s house into a hideout for thieves.”

“God is your father and my father and father to everyone in this room.” He looked to the ceiling of the magnificent edifice, then, holding both hands outstretched making his body in the shape of a cross, he said, “if you tear down this temple, I will rebuild it in three days.”

The head priest’s eyeballs glazed. I could see he now regretted mixing it with Jesus. He signalled to the Roman sentries and then turned back to Jesus, “You should go now.”

Everyone was exhausted and relieved at an end to this sparring. Jesus not wanting further trouble nodded silently. We made our way to the exit with the Roman guard shadowing us from a distance.

At the door Jesus could resist having one more go. Staring straight at Caiaphas he shouted, “he who truly believes ... can throw a mountain into the sea!”

This left the crowd and even us perplexed.

We emerged from the temple into the dying light of the afternoon. Simon Peter scratched his balls and pointed back through the temple doors, “well that showed them eh?”

“You can’t show them,” Jesus replied. “They are maggots in a carcass. Pimping priests have rented the temple to whores.”

“You dine with whores, they wash your feet with perfume,” I said to him.

He paused and looked at me and then spoke deliberately, “mostly I dine with fools and traitors.”

His expression signalled disgust, which I deserved because she was not a whore. I was just scoring points. He turned away from me and walked down the stairs.

For a while we walked in silent discontent then he stopped me again.

“You should stop counting Judas.”

“Counting what?”

“All the reasons why I have to be stopped.”

I stared back without speaking and thought to myself, one of these days you’re going to wake up under a fucking rock.

His heat suddenly became coldness and he pierced me, “both of us Judas.”

We followed him in silence.

After a while we came again to the fig tree he had cursed the day before. Most of the leaves had fallen to the ground and turned to ash. The stump was a charred skeleton. The tree’s canopy was now reduced to the trunk and two horizontal limbs which grew from either side of the trunk three quarters of the way up.

He was kneeling before it weeping like an old woman. His knees had sunk into the bed of ash which surrounded the burnt remains. The sound that issued from his throat was a cry of the most desperate loneliness. I had only heard a sound like it once

before when I had seen a man about to be executed by the Romans, he had begged for his life to no avail. I was overcome with pity for Jesus.

“What is it Master?” Simon Peter asked.

“When they nail my feet to this traitor’s tree you will deny you ever knew me.”

“Me?” asked Simon Peter in that bewildered tone that he had.

He ignored Simon Peter and looked up at me, “And you Judas I am very sorry for you.”

The fishermen looked at me as I returned his pitying sorrowful gaze. A puff of wind dislodged the last few black leaves from the tree and they floated slowly and silently downward. The leaves hovered in the air and the last glimmer of twilight before falling to their final end in the bitter ash. We too were falling to our final end I realised. I wished we could have shared a different life but now we were locked together by fate, spiralling into infinite darkness. My heart pumped furiously and I reached out to touch him but he turned away from me. I opened my mouth to express my sorrow and promise my love to him but no sound came out. Once again I was mute.