

IT WASN'T SUPPOSED TO BE THIS HARD. They'd told me the way of it since I was a little boy: work hard, save money, buy a home, find a nice girl. Jewish, of course. Get married, have some children. Sons, maybe, to train up in the craft, little hands wrapped around tiny saws and miniature nails until they learned the shape and feel of the wood. It was an ordinary-enough dream, the kind of dream you have if you're a boy from a small town. But in the end, even that was out of reach.

She seemed nice enough. I'd glimpsed her a number of times, feeding her chickens or drawing water from the well. Slender, veiled, well brought-up. The only child of elderly parents, and their faces glowed to see her, every time. My knees were shaking when I went to speak to them, I, a carpenter, a landless man. I knew they could do better for their daughter, but I am of the house of David, and that's no mean thing; it adds a little glamor, even among the poor. And I'm devout, I told them. I'm in synagogue every sabbath. I give what I have to the people who ask me: the crazy man who lives behind the hill, or Yitzak, who was born with no feet. Him, I even took into my home. He works for me now, and has a roof and food of his own, and friends to share them with. I would be good to her, I told them. "There are other suitors," they replied, "and they have more than you do." I tried quoting scripture -- that often works: "Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it....Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice." (Prov 15:16, 16:8) In the end, they let her come down to see me. She hovered in the door of the inner room, clinging to shadow. I held out a gift I had made her: a small lamb carved from olive-wood, not much, but every detail made to breathe with life. I laid it in her hand, and her smile broke out, and I went away, but I knew in that smile she was mine.

Or, I thought I did. We announced the engagement that week, but it wasn't a month later that her father came to me, and the hair on his head had turned grey. He came in and shut the door and bowed his face to the ground, and his face was streaked with tears. "A child," he whispered. "We do not know whose. She will not say. I am so sorry. She has shamed our house and yours."

I stood there in my own home, with the hangings I had prepared for her and the pots I had imagined her cooking in, and I did not know what to say. She had seemed so pure, so innocent, but she'd taken me for a fool all along. And I'd been one, too. The whole town would know it: Joseph, they'd call me, the one whose girl got pregnant by another man, and couldn't even wait for him to fill her bed. I'd have to move. I would never live this down. I could cry out my rage, run to the rabbis and the elders; they would drag her from her parents' door and stone her until the pollution was cleansed from our town. But I didn't want her dead. I just wanted this nightmare to be over. I looked ahead, and saw the shadow of the son I'd imagined having, heard the soft giggle of the girl who'd follow him into life, curly-haired and dimpled, and I could not hate the girl I'd hoped would bear them. As I looked, the children turned and walked away into shadow -- another dream I would not see in this life. "Go away," I whispered to her father. "Just go away."

That night, I went to my room in secret and I drew the curtain and I bowed down with my face to the ground. I'd spent a life in prayer, but never had I prayed like this: to a God gone

suddenly strange, with the wreckage of my dreams around me on the ground. I was no Abraham, to be a father of nations. I was not even Isaac, taken to the slaughter, for here, there would be no reprieve. I was just about Jacob, the weasel who'd tried to steal a blessing that wasn't his to have, who'd have to flee from home and make a stone his pillow and wrestle with God to find a place to belong again. But late in the night, just before dawn, I seemed to be wrestling, not with myself, but with another. To this day, I do not know whether I woke or slept; I did not see his face. But I heard a voice in my heart, and it was as strong and clear as a hammer ringing on iron: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matt 1: 20-21) And when dawn came, that voice was still there; it followed me through my day until I found myself at her parents' house, and I went in the door and I found her father and said, "I will wed her." He gaped, of course, wondered if I were crazy. "And the child?" he asked. "I've fed other men's children before," I said, "when they were hungry. I can do it again. She can't raise him alone." He opened his mouth to protest, but I was saving his daughter's life and you don't question a miracle. "She's visiting her cousin," he said. "An elderly woman, long past child-bearing, who's finally been blessed with a child. We thought to leave her there the whole nine months." "Bring her back early," I said. "I'd like to at least pretend this boy is mine."

And so we were married, her belly barely swollen as yet. She seemed to be in a kind of trance, caught between terror and joy, and I didn't know how to speak to her, across the strangeness that had happened in our lives. But one thing she did say: "I watched you when we were children. You were always taking in strays: injured birds, blind kittens. I guess I'm just one more thing for you to pity." It was as close as she came to saying thank you. It was a hard few months, not what you expect when you get married. She moved around the house in a kind of shocked silence, cooked food, cleaned, hid her belly from the neighbors. She spent hours in prayer -- more time with God than she spent with me. She said God was the baby's true father. "He'll need one in flesh and blood," I said. "Love doesn't do much good if you can't touch it."

And then the census, as if we needed one more trouble: crossing miles of road in the winter cold. We saddled up a donkey for her to sit on, but still, it was hard, her blue with cold and I worried for her and for the child, and all the travelers rutting the roads, trying to get home to be counted. As if a man could be known by his name and town, and not by his love of God and the fire in his heart! At the beginning, God said to Abraham, "Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore." (Gen 22:16-17) That means that it's a sin to try to number the people of God; each of us is more than what can be counted, but then, the Gentiles have never understood the things of God.

And all the while, her belly was growing, and I tried to open my heart to the child, that unknown child whose face would not be mine. All I wanted was for us to get to Bethlehem. If we could only arrive there, I'd have family to count on. But we were late, and the roads were bitter --the Romans were worse -- and when I got to the house where my father's sister lived, a stranger opened the door and told me she had died three years past. And Mary was moaning on the donkey, and her eyes were wide and frightened, and she whispered, "I think my time is upon me." And so we went to the inn, but it was full up with travelers -- Romans, most of them, and

probably eating pork! -- and the innkeeper was harassed and surly and turned us away, but then the door opened again and his wife darted out. "I see your wife is pregnant. Is it her time?" "Yes," I said. "Then try, at least, our barn. It's warmer than outside." And she left her customers calling for ale and came to us with steaming water and a few cloths not quite clean, and laid her hands on Mary's belly and whispered in the manner of women.

I tell you, I had never felt so useless in all my life. I'm a solid man, a steady provider, used to being able to do what is needed when the need is upon me, but I know nothing of the mysteries of women. And here I could not give the girl even the barest of decencies: a roof, a fire, a hot meal, the company of family. We were thrown upon the mercy of a stranger, like those baby birds I'd fed when I was a boy, peeping up to see what God would bring to meet their hunger. Only, it didn't seem like any of our hungers were going to be met.

In the end, it was a boy, and I named him Jesus, as the voice had said. He lay there in the warm straw, his mother weak beside him, ready to sleep, and then the door burst open and there was a rush of strangers - dirty, burly shepherds with their loud boots and country accents, asking, "Is this the Savior? Is it? Is it?" I tell you, it was one fool thing too many: the mother and baby needing to sleep, and these clunky men interrupting, waking them, the baby howling for food, the men reaching rough, grimy fingers toward his tiny hands, and I reached down and snatched him up and held him in my arms. "*He is my son,*" I said.

And, somehow, it was true.

And the shepherds gawked at me, at him, at the exhausted girl -- my wife -- they babbled some story about angels, crazy talk, it was. But they hushed their voices and their faces shone as if they were in the Temple itself, and it was clear enough they'd seen something. "Glory to God in the highest heaven," they said, "and on earth peace, goodwill among men." It's not the kind of thing you'd expect a shepherd to say: more like a priest's blessing, only not just for us Hebrews, but for all the people of earth. I didn't know what to make of it, and then they left, and she and I were alone again, and I realized I was still holding the baby, his head upon my shoulder. He fit there, as if he were born for it.

And so she slept, all that long night, and I held the child in my arms. Only, once or twice, I nodded off and got confused, and it seemed that I was the child, and he was holding me in arms strong enough to hold all this earth together. And in the dim light, I could almost hear a singing on the wind, and sometimes it seemed as if light were trying to come in the windows and creep under the stable door, all the light in the night sky, as if the very stars wanted to come in. It seemed as though all creation were waiting to receive this child: the kings in their ivory palaces, and the little ones lost on the plain, the soldiers walking their rounds in the cold, the animals blowing and stamping in the stalls -- the whole world hushed and kneeling beside a stable door.

And then he cried, and Mary stirred and put him to her breast, and, somehow, it all became right again. O, I'd wanted son of my body, the fruit of his mother's love and mine. And I'd dreamed it all perfect: nice and straight and true. I'd been waiting for life to come in the holy places, the expected places, but Adonai had given me a stable and an orphan and a frightened girl -- and still, it was all from God's hand. Not where I was looking for it, but here, where the world was ragged and broken, where people were ragged and broken, and I was among them, as ragged and broken as any -- here, where a sign of love was needed most of all. And I looked at the girl looking at me, and I thought that this, too, needed mending. So I knelt down beside her and took

her hand in mine -- the first time I'd ever touched her. It was warm and calloused from work, and she looked at me in surprise, then her fingers curled around mine, and it seemed we were a family after all.

And I thought of the boy - my son, however he came to me - and it seemed to me that if I could teach him any one thing, it would be this: how strangers can become family, even at the worst of times. How God can gather us together, reaching through our shame and fear and lostness, can speak with a still, small voice in our heart that we are loved beyond measure, even as we are, however we came to be. Because if I could learn to love that little boy, whom I had not wanted, then surely God, who is so much more, could love us, even amid our mess -- not just when we were righteous, but love us back into wholeness, just as I would give that boy a place in this world and a name he could own with pride.

And a craft, maybe -- carpentry! -- his little hands steady on the wood. And the stories of Torah -- I'd teach him to read! And how to fish, and how to laugh, and how to race in the sun, and throw a ball, and tease the girls: how to live in his own skin. And he'd grow brown with the sun and shine in the rain and nothing would ever hurt him, if I could help it. He may have been born nothing, but with God and with me he'd be someone, and no one would forget him again. Because in the beginning, when God wanted to bless Abraham, he gave him a son, and it looked like I'd have that blessing, after all.