



THE GOSPEL OF JHYLOO

A Novel by
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Who was the real father of Jesus?

CHAPTER 1

TWO BEINGS IN A ROOM ON EARTH

Ah, so this is going to be one of those days, the girl Miriam thought. One of those dark days when, no matter how warm it is, you are cold. Wind hadn't stopped blowing in hours and rain beat through the streets, against the houses, in the windows.

The women had been telling her things of late, frightening things: Her role as woman, wife and mother, her responsibilities. As if she hadn't heard all that a million times before. Although she could never completely squash her curiosity about the world or her wild imagination, the girl wanted always to do everything right, to please her father, and God's law. Most of all she wanted to do everything according to what the women thought was right. She knew already—that it was the women who had their part in the making of God's laws. They put it right into the food. And then the men wrote it down. So she wanted to be accepted into the secret society that was women. Of course she knew that once she had a real husband, the men would no longer look at her as anyone but someone's wife. And any one of them who would, well...

As she came through her chamber, she wrapped her colorless shawl around her. She just couldn't get warm today. An unusual storm, blowing north from the sea. Rain could never provide nearly enough of what the desert needed in the way of water. But now and then the rains came, through the streets, against the houses, into the windows.

Soon the men would clammer in out of the rain and demand attention. For the moment, for one moment, she was alone in the house and peering into the deserted street. Alone in the city, it seemed. A peddler battled the

weather and cried out. The whole world was blue with rain. One of those rare intense bursts of water that fill deliciously the cracked dry mouth of the desert. Every particle, every atom becomes damp at once, as if to snatch up its share of precious moisture. Like a deep passionate kiss upon the lips of a very old lady. Something incongruous, almost wasted, but utterly precious.

Another peddler. A Roman soldier on horseback. She trembled. Was it him? No. Just another nameless foreigner. Nothing else. A few tapers glowed in some of the windows. Although it was day it was night. Suddenly she turned from the window and looked about the room.

No one.

The women were always warning girls of desert marauders, criminals and nomad raiders, drunken soldiers who could almost smell when a young girl was alone in a house. Judea was not a safe place any more.

But she wasn't just a girl any longer, so being alone in a house couldn't be so dangerous. She was between twelve or fourteen years old by now. She wasn't sure exactly. She had to be at least that because the women had been including her in their whispering for well over a year. And that meant she must be twelve at least. Possibly much older. Then, too, her body had surprised her, pushing out in all directions, swelling up, changing shape, like rising dough, all the while growing more tender and sensitive. And she had begun several moons ago to feel like a clam, lifted and dropped, lifted and dropped by the tides of some unseen ocean, each cycle punctuated with the flow of blood from her most private self. This was some mysterious ritual that tied her to the bounce and shifting rhythm that echoed through the whole world. Womanhood was a direct line straight to God. Every woman knew that. The men knew it, too. That's why they made

such a noisy claim on God. That's why their decisions had to be final.

What a magnificent country to grow up in. Although she'd never been anywhere else, this must be the most beautiful places in the world. On sunny days, life was intense here, men pulling carts through the dust, hawking their wares, soldiers jangling through the streets in loud authority, children screaming between the stalls of the markets as they chased terrified goose. That was the whole world and, although at times she longed for an adventure in a distant land, it was almost enough for her. Becoming a woman was fearful and, yes, exciting, too. Her friends were already taking husbands and marrying. Bracha was already a wife, mother and member of the coven of mothers who knew what motherhood meant. And here was her body bursting into bloom. So many currents were crossing within her. Could she ever live up to those unspoken expectations she could still see in her dead mother's eyes?

Each day she would steal a moment to steal away and walk by herself to watch the Sun setting against the far western hills, even when it was almost too hot to breathe. It was on one of those sunset days that she had met the Roman astride his magnificent horse. Unnoticing, business would go on as usual.

"Pears. Lemons!" a peddler's voice would rise above the clack of the wagon wheels..

Her body might say it was happening only now, but the girl had been a woman for as long as she could remember. So many responsibilities. Sometimes she would find herself running home, running until her sides ached and it pained her to breathe, thinking of some tasks she had left unfinished, some chores that must be attended to before sundown on the

Sabbath. And sometimes, when she reached home, she couldn't remember what those chores had been. Her father would greet her, seated at the table, never scolding her, but always in his eyes—she wasn't doing enough.

What had she done wrong? Why did her mother have to die? That wasn't right, to grow up like an old lady when she herself was just a child, without a mother.

Her mother had wanted so much for her and expected a lot in return. She never knew why. And even in death, her mother lingered as the girl continued to be an impeccable daughter. She thought of these things again as she carried a loaf of bread up the stairs, wiped her forehead with a rag, then paused again to look out the window.

Today she felt like being idle, but naturally she couldn't. She had scrubbed the stairs at dawn, set out food for the men, and visited the markets under gathering clouds. All afternoon she baked bread and now, as the final corner of the day was turning, her mind wandered. So it was the rain that made her pause in the impeccable execution of her duties to watch the beggars flee to shelter in the alleys. She paused, but in her calm, there was an uneasy nervousness.

A dark-haired, sad-eyed girl, alone in a house. So many days she had carried loaves of bread up these stairs, wondering all the while who would actually turn out to be the man of her dreams. Today she had scrubbed the stairs harder than ever, as if, if God were watching, her girlish longings would come true. The woman she hoped to become—who was she? Did she scrub the stairs, or did people bow and kneel when they came in her presence?

Miriam jumped. It's so quiet!

As loudly as the rain beat against the stones of the street, she could hardly hear anything. Last night, she and her young man had seen the first sliver of moon beneath a bright star just after sunset.

"Tomorrow night, a kiss," he had said. She had looked into his deep eyes and felt a race of a strange emotion (was it hope?) within her as she stood close to his lanky frame. They had parted with a brush of cheeks, forbidden or not. She liked his smell. And two hands clasping at the edge of a road. This is what both their families had decreed.

"Is love honor or drunkenness?" she had asked him and then again asked herself when she had finally lain down for the night.

Marriage must be a strange experience. The man you married was the only road you ever traveled in your lifetime. That was odd. Your parents prayed and schemed in an effort to outsmart God, just to provide you with a secure fate in the hands of a strange man.

What was that? Another noise.

Only the sounds of her own finger scratching a mite on her shoulder. Otherwise a world driven inward by rain. And so, silence. Where were the men? At least Solomon should be here. Ha! He's supposed to be tending the fire. That's when the fire goes out. Every week, when Solomon is tending.

Hassi usually stopped by at this time of day, peddling nuts, lemons and his seductive desert smile. But not today. Even he had found shelter.

And the women. Where could they be? They were always here. Gigantic Becca lumbering elephant-like loudly throughout the house, raining sweet affection on everybody's child. There was Malkah as well with

her dour tranquility, showing everyone who would listen her most recent bruise or swelling. And Aunt Na, the sweet and silent woman who had acted as mother for years.

For God's sake, where were they? It's not good to be alone when it gets dark. It's not safe. That's what they are always saying, isn't it? Where are they?

How could the girl know that the women were all over at Bracha's. Her husband killed himself that morning, stabbed himself in the heart with a sword in a grove of lemon trees not five minutes away from his own house. And here was Bracha with a new born son, and two other children from the last man she had survived. When the women heard the news, they went straightaway to Bracha's to scream, cut up the dead man's shoes and boil clothes.

The men, too, went to see what they could do to help. Some scandal with taxes and the officials with Bracha's husband, no doubt. Maybe the Rabbi could help,; he seemed to have a way with these foreigners. So the men had gone to see the rabbi in the hopes of helping Bracha avoid a nasty situation with the Romans. The Romans, it seemed were planning to seize her home, property and everything. By killing himself Evrum had shamed his family, and according to the law, his body must lie for eternity with the backs of all turned away from him. Practically speaking, the officials would have to be appeased some way, for Bracha and the children's sake.

But the girl never heard of the tragedy. When she returned home and found an empty house, at first she was frightened to be alone, but such a rare opportunity! She could sing, dance or give orders to imaginary servants. The whole household was hers.

The day was wearing on, however. Rain was slowing down, but still the town was dead, and darkness would soon--

A footstep?

No, probably just a dog shifting its weight and sighing in sleep.

She put bread on the shelves, folded cloth, swept the stairs once again and went to the window a dozen times to watch for the return of the family.

Absently she began to sing.

She hummed at first, then added words as she remembered them. A love song she had heard sung many times by those handsome young men who roam the desert, then burst into the city to buy and sell, stagger drunken and singing through the alleys while human beings, families, take their evening meal behind closed shutters.

As she sang, she grew less anxious, until, for a moment, she forgot that she was dangerously alone.

She came to the head of the stairs and went on singing, descending slowly, dancing from step to step. Her mind wasn't on fear now. Desert marauders, drunken soldiers, indeed! Nothing to fear from men who sang such lovely verse.

The lower room that opened to the street was dark. The one window was shuttered tight now and the door was locked. She had seen to that the moment she had become aware she was alone. So the only light came from the window on the stairs.

She sang, "When you look into their eyes, you will know the secret..."

The intruder stood in the corner, unobserved, recovering from his brief passage through nothingness. As he recaptured himself, he caught sight

of this creature before him, a gram of pure, divine artistry. And the music—it must not be interrupted.

She'd never know what hit her. But she was not ordinary. Not at all. A peasant, yes, but something much more.

Watch out! You're not on the ring. You've stepped off the ring.

Two beings in a room.

This ambush had been played a thousand times.

He scanned her.

The girl would never sleep that night. In fact, she would never sleep again as soundly as she had slept last night when the young man had pointed to a sliver of the Moon and promised her a kiss.

They would come home from Bracha's. The men and the women, full of dismay and grief. Full of philosophy and anger at the power of the Invader's authority and especially full of certainty about one thing: That divine, invisible hands were clamped firmly over all their eyes.

They would never notice that she moved about the room in silence, whacked speechless by what was to happen to her that afternoon.

He scanned her again.

Two beings in a room. Like a bug walking over your hand. The man felt naked and alone before an awesome creature, but excited, the way you feel when you are about to pounce a bottle over an insect for the sake of your studies. "When you look into their eyes, you will know what I mean..." she sang.

A flash of jewel in the corner, and even before Miriam turned to face it, she knew she was doomed.

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