

Three Days

Roused from midnight slumber, two donkeys brayed softly at the screeching boy. Fresh from his mother's body, stunned by the cave's wintry air, the baby writhed as his protector wrestled with the swaddling cloths.

"Resonant voice," observed Joseph. "Maybe we should tell the Temple choir director."

The child's mother smiled briefly. "Maybe I should feed him first." Firelight illuminated Mary's sweat-streaked face. Exhausted from a day of labor, she had nearly forgotten the goal amid her whirling pain. But she'd pushed fiercely at Joseph's command till finally the infant emerged and she recalled Gabriel's prophecy: he will be called Jesus, Son of the Most High.

The baby, weary from his own ordeal, abandoned his rampage and sank into oblivion. Grateful for the interlude, Joseph presented Mary her wrapped offspring, plumped the straw propping her shoulders, and lay beside her on the cloak-covered ground. Now it begins, he thought.

They slept an hour. When screams assaulted them they eyed their child, but Jesus relaxed in Mary's embrace, his eyes sealed shut. Such guttural wails suggested grownup lungs; another voice must be the source. Yanking a branch from the fire, Joseph tracked the cries. Under a lowering ceiling, the cavern angled left and right and through a tunnel, beyond which hid a chamber six feet wide.

Joseph poked his torch inside. Beside the prone body of a woman huddled a man, moaning hoarsely and stroking the woman's arm. She lay in some kind of puddle. From a small rolled blanket whimpers came. Crawling, Joseph leaned the burning stick against a wall. The

man stared wildly at Joseph and raised the woman's wrist. "She's dead."

"I know," Joseph answered. "I'm sorry."

"My son," the man added, motioning at the blanket. "He'll die, too. I'll lose them both."

"Come out with me," Joseph urged. "I'll carry the baby. No one will find your wife here." Numbly, the man draped the woman's hands across her waist. Joseph shouldered the child, grabbed the torch, and lit their passage out.

When Mary saw the stranger, clearly anguished, and the bundle squirming on her husband's chest, she grasped the tale. Mary pictured her, a woman like herself, a host struggling to unhook the tethered guest before her own flesh failed. I could be dead, she thought; Joseph could be left alone to raise the Child of God.

Two sounds converged. Inside the blanket, whimpers turned to shrieks as the newborn felt his first harsh hunger stabs. In Mary's lap, Jesus, still unfed, revived and pressed his face against her robe, grunting, rooting, needing sustenance like any carpenter's child. The widowed man, awash in grief, sat crumpled by the fire.

Shrugging at Joseph, Mary stretched her arm out and he placed the squalling boy beside his own. Mary positioned them, a child in her right arm, another in her left, face to face. By now both boys protested, sobbing lustily, thrashing for their food. With Joseph's help she rearranged her robe and brought the small heads near, flattening their cheeks against her breasts. Instinctively they knew this meant survival. In synchrony they opened rounded mouths to stuff themselves with life.

Suddenly the children, tense and eager, flung their eyelids up, and gazing past their waiting meals caught sight of one another. Instantly their eyes locked. Hovering each astride a

nipple, mouth agape, they focused beyond each other's wide, dark pupils to a place within.

"What's wrong?" Joseph questioned. "Aren't they hungry?"

Mary hiked her elbows up, nuzzling her breasts across parted lips. As if startled from a dream, the motherless child flung his face toward Mary and inhaled, fastening his jaw around her flesh. Thick, yellow drops slid down his throat; rigid muscles slacked. At Mary's other breast, Jesus closed his empty mouth and floated back against his mother's arm. Gently she eased her nipple between his lips, but again he calmly pulled away.

"Maybe he dislikes sharing his table," Joseph suggested, lifting the quieted stranger onto his lap. "Try it now."

Cradling Jesus snugly, Mary whispered, "See? It's just for you," and rubbed his cheek once more against her skin. He stared unruffled at her face and turned aside. "I don't understand," she declared. "A minute ago he bellowed out his hunger. Now he acts quite full. In fact, he sleeps." Perplexed, they watched the child's lashes flicker down.

The other boy, unsated by the single dose of pre-engorgement milk, clamped his mouth round Joseph's knuckle, found it barren, and complained. "No sense wasting food," Joseph said. So Mary took the child back and offered him her unsucked breast, which he gladly took, then fell asleep.

They rested, five of them, till at dawn the babies woke and all the grownups followed. Conscious anew of last night's loss, the unknown man lamented, "Leah! Leah!" Joseph gripped the stranger's slumping form. Mary raised the babies, one fretting for his breakfast, one solemnly alert, and held them to her breasts. The clamoring child drained his supply and squirmed for more, while Jesus scanned the cave, the shadows, the animals, but ignored his food. Nothing

Mary tried could make him drink. At length she reversed the boys and gave away her child's portion, knowing if he changed his mind she'd lack enough.

The man Simeon, they learned, had ridden from Emmaus, as they from Nazareth, obeying Rome's decree. Tiny Bethlehem, packed with David's offspring, quartered most in nearby caves, where Simeon and Leah claimed a birthing spot. In their hidden room they hugged each other as their son destroyed their world. Before she died they named the boy Elisha—God saves—but now Simeon wished the name to change: Ben-Oni—son of my trouble. A day of queuing for the census loomed unbearable; Simeon curled beside the hay and rocked.

So Joseph registered himself and Mary and their child, then bought burial spices and linen cloths. At dusk he returned to those he loved and asked, "Well? Did Jesus eat?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Who knows? I offered every hour. Elisha drank his share and Jesus' as well. Joseph, our child has ingested nothing since his birth. How will he live?"

"I cannot answer. Does he fight you?"

"No, he sleeps and looks and sleeps and looks, contented as a baby gorged with milk."

"Then he's safe so far. Perhaps tonight."

But that evening Jesus gazed enraptured at a donkey's face, rejecting peaceably his mother's breast, till Mary let Elisha swallow every yellow drop. When shepherds came to view the Christ, Simeon scooped up his son, the spices and the cloths, and fled to Leah's tomb until they left. As the moon traversed the sky, Mary hoisted yet again both boys to suck. Only one obliged, and she wondered if her firstborn son would starve.

Then, as all five slept and pink clouds hinted of the sun's rise, Mary felt herself grow full. Behind the thickened droplets, far inside her chest, the vital human foodstuff surged like lava to her breasts, hardening them beneath the stretching skin. Unprompted, milk streamed out and soaked her robe. In self-defense she seized the babies nestled by her side and plastered them against the swollen flesh.

As one, they suctioned in the nipples, shuddering at the onslaught, gulping fast. She heard the milk spurt, heard the newborn throats convulse and bloom. She felt her body letting go the fluid of life, tingling atop her ribs, just as women back to Sarah and before had done. For an hour, twin boys groped in muted light. Siphoning till they bulged, with excess drizzling down their chins, they dropped unconscious back to Mary's side.

Relieved, Mary leaned her head on Joseph's arm, ready for a day of nursing two. Despite his sorrow, Simeon planned to join the census line. His sister Hannah, mother of five children, would, he knew, accept Elisha at her breast. But first he must endure the registration. From dawn to dark, Simeon, accompanied by Joseph, waited at the Romans' table.

And in the cave, the babies levied taxes of their own. Elisha suckled happily and smoothly, napping enough between meals to let the milk replenish. Jesus nursed frenziedly, obsessively, depleting his supply, peering tentatively round the cavern, starting in anew. All day insatiably he fed, bewildering his mother. When Simeon and Joseph hastened finally to their sons, they found Elisha dozing, Jesus guzzling.

"He's hardly stopped since sunup," Mary reported.

"Good," approved Joseph.

"Good?" She shifted painfully. "I'm glad his appetite's robust, but he's a lion hunting

prey."

"Probably he's compensating."

"I'm not sure, Joseph. I've seen infants suffer hunger for a day. Afterward they nurse heartily, but not like this. Jesus eats enough for two."

That night the trend continued, Elisha supping equably, Jesus compulsively. By first light, Mary's overflow surpassed the previous day's. Cupping the babies to her breasts, she let them drink, expecting full release from her engorgement. To her surprise, Jesus and Elisha nursed with vigor only half an hour, then in tandem quit.

Joseph saw her grimace. "What happened?"

"They both ate like normal, healthy boys."

"Isn't that what you want?"

"Not today," she told him. "Today there's milk for three."

Clasping torch and blanket, Simeon and Joseph headed toward the chamber to retrieve the dead. Laying down the children, Mary padded to a donkey and withdrew a pair of wineskins, Simeon's and Leah's, from a pouch. Uncorking both, she poured the woman's wine into her husband's and re-corked the bloated skin. Then, hunching forward, lowering her robe, she enclosed her nipple in the empty bottle's mouth, coiled her hand around her breast, and squeezed. Milk shot. Repeatedly she compressed her flesh, forcing out the nourishment no child had drunk.

Simeon and Joseph reappeared, bearing Leah's blanket-shrouded form. Mary watched them tie her to the donkey. Then Simeon staggered to the ground.

"The census stole what strength he had," explained Joseph. "Life without her frightens him. A few more hours' rest will help him start."

Until late morning Simeon slept. Twice again the babies nursed; twice more the wineskin trapped the extra milk. Simeon awoke, sighed, lifted up his son from Mary's arms.

"Simeon," she said, handing him a twisted bit of rag, "Leah's wineskin holds the milk your baby drinks, enough to satisfy him till Emmaus. Dip this cloth into the milk and let him nurse."

He straightened. "You have kept my son alive. When Elisha grows enough to understand, he will learn your child gave him food." Simeon led his donkey to the entryway, bowed at them and left.

Mary and Joseph looked at Jesus, sleeping tranquilly amid the straw. "So," Joseph mused, "he feeds like a standard infant now?"

"Indeed."

"And you are comfortable?"

"No. It will be a long day. But with milk, demand precedes supply. He'll adjust the stock as needed."

"What about tomorrow? How much will there be?"

"Enough for one."