

## A MAN BORN WHEN HE IS OLD

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*His clothes showed neither wealth nor poverty; he dressed with the modesty of the craftsmen from his region, without a single thread of precious metals. He wore a homemade fabric that a woman had labored over as she recreated the patterns she had learned from her elders.*

—Tomás de Mattos, *La puerta de la misericordia* (Gate of Mercy)

This took place back in the days when the city was small and its Jewish, dusty streets were trampled under the feet of the most magnificent, powerful empire on the face of the earth. This was the empire that soared like an eagle from the heated deserts of Arabia to the fathomless deep of the Mediterranean Sea to the valleys and mountains of the European continent. From there, from that Europe that did not worship Jehovah, the empire had struck Judea. Under Caesar's ensign, it had pounced upon God's people, advancing in swift chariots that carried men protected by breastplates and pagan arrogance. The empire had comfortably taken control of the sacred province, defiling it with Western traders, Greco-Roman tongues, voracious taxes, and imperial order.

Everyone despised the empire but none quite like Cleopas bar Simon, who housed the rage of hell within the gates of his heart. Since he was but ten years old, since the day he heard Judas of Galilee spit venom out of his mouth causing the true Jews to take up arms against the devilish Romans, Cleopas felt his life had a purpose. That purpose was to completely expel the arrogant foreigner. At night he dreamt of the day when the Roman banners would burn in the wrath of the Lord,

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*Self-Translated from the Spanish*

the legitimate king of Israel, and when Jewish sandals would crush Roman skulls. During the day, he would ride his horse swiftly, like a deadly dart, and attack all presence of the empire. He would enter the villages and beat those treacherous publicans, or he would hide in the ruins of abandoned towns to then have his sling hurl stones at the centurions and their henchmen who could never quite catch up to him. He was as wise as a serpent and moved with the rustling of a dove. He lived in Jerusalem, encircled about by the city's walls, but he reached all of Judea.

One day Cleopas left the city walls and went into the desert, a sandy sea that had forever cleansed the prophets. He headed toward the secret caves where he would meet with other Zealots like himself, some of whom actually lived in desert caves. The desert was the Lord's furnace, where true Jews were purified. The desert, as everlasting as time is endless, had brought forth the law and the prophets. Cleopas was certain that only they who had been transformed—by the dry, burning air; by the blue, distant sky; by the temptation to just die among stones and sand—only they could establish the Lord's kingdom among the covenant people once again.

He arrived at the caves with no name. He dismounted his horse and left it next to other horses that were tied to a beam brought from Damascus. Torch in hand, he followed the natural maze formed by the dry, dark caves until he reached the meeting place. The place was a secret of secrets, a place no Roman knew about or would ever know about. Six other Zealots waited for him there.

"Peace," said Cleopas. Everyone greeted back, and the discussion continued. Cleopas listened attentively. They argued over whether to attack a caravan that the next morning would head out of Jerusalem toward Rome. Everyone agreed that the caravan was worthy of destruction—it was made of cowardly Jews who saw the Romans as their lords when in reality the only true Lord was God. The point of debate was whether there was any strategic importance to the attack.

“It’s not worth it. The only way to establish the kingdom of God is by overthrowing the Romans. Attacking this caravan won’t topple them,” Eleazar bar Abiel said, visibly irritated. “It’s not worth the risk.”

“Are you afraid of danger and sacrifice?” asked Joshua bar Barnabas. Silence followed. The six men looked at Eleazar, expecting an answer. Zealots understood quite well that their cause involved danger and sacrifice. Vile Rome was the greatest empire since the days of Adam. “Who is like unto Rome?” was a question posed in the streets of the world. Everyone marveled at her superiority in the battlefield, at her chariots that sped like wasps, at her arrows like stingers, at her swarm-like armies. But Zealots did not fear Rome because, much like the Maccabees, they were unwavering martyrs in a divine cause.

“No, I fear only the Lord God,” replied Eleazar assertively. “And that is why I think that destroying that caravan is too meager a task for the servants of the Lord. He will be on our right hand and on our left hand. His name is great. Too great for such small matters. His might must be shown through something greater. Without Him, we are nothing, but with Him, even the temple can be ours.”

There was silence yet again. None dared contradict Eleazar’s logic, but the temple was too much for now—too much in the center, too unstable to attempt taking it over. For now.

“Are you afraid? The Lord of Hosts has commanded that we be not afraid, that we be of good courage,” said Eleazar.

Silence.

“Eleazar is right. Alone we cannot do this, but with God all things are possible. If it be His will that He intervene, He will. I believe He already is. The people are enthralled by this new rabbi. This Jesus of Nazareth who challenges the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

Cleopas had heard everywhere of the new, puzzling personage. *The man is a prophet. He surely is a prophet. No, no, the man is Elijah. He can be no one else. But are you blind? Can’t you see he is John the Baptist come back from the tomb? Not John the Baptist. He is a charlatan who tramples*

*on the Law of Moses*. These and many other things Cleopas had heard about the man. Cleopas was not interested in any of it, until he heard a fisherman say that Jesus was the Messiah foretold in scripture. The idea was nonsense. The Messiah would come in power and glory, and the first thing he would do would be to liberate Israel from the predatory empire. Yet the fisherman believed this Jesus to be the Messiah, and many others followed the supposed Galilean Messiah. Cleopas did not believe in false messiahs, but he knew this man from tiny Nazareth in troublesome Galilee could be a tool in arousing the people to resist Rome and her pagan gods.

Joshua spoke, "Yes, but Jesus of Nazareth does not oppose Rome. He teaches blasphemy. He claims to be the Son of God. He is a heretic worthy of death!"

"It's true, but the people follow him in ignorance," pointed out Cleopas. "They believe his words. They trust his judgment. So we can have Jesus incite the people into anger against the empire. And then, who can be against us? We can take the temple."

The idea consumed Cleopas, but his fellow comrades in arms did not think it wise to try to win over Jesus. Once the meeting was over, as he returned on horseback to Jerusalem, Cleopas continued to think about the likely advantages of enrolling the rabbi from Nazareth. By the time he reached the city gates, he knew what to do.

As the dawn broke the next morning, Cleopas left Jerusalem and traveled north, following the Jordan River to avoid riding into any Samaritan dogs. In his mind, he tried to imagine what the man he was seeking after might be like, how to best approach him, what words to say, and what influence that man could yield in favor of the Zealots. Theirs was the most important cause in the universe. Upon the cause's altar Cleopas had placed all: his life, his time, his every thought, his every passion, everything. The cause was his life. There was no life before or after the cause. If he had to face down a false or even a true Messiah, he would do it for the cause's sake. And this Nazarene could

breathe new life into the cause. Cleopas was certain of it. That is why it was imperative to have that Jesus of Nazareth join the cause. Israel would soon be redeemed.

Cleopas spent the whole trip unwittingly submerged in thoughts of glory and redemption. He arrived in Galilee, a land of windless days and dry nights, without knowing where he might find the rabbi. He also did not know, upon arriving, how extensive Jesus' popularity was—everyone talked about him, and his whereabouts were common knowledge. Cleopas spoke with some traders who told him to follow a certain path that went around a hill. The Zealot followed the path, and as he came around the bend, he found a large multitude—hundreds of people sitting around, talking, cooking, moving here and there—waiting for their Master to continue teaching. Cleopas was surprised to see that many people. He hesitated, concerned about the appropriateness of approaching this Jesus amid so many followers. In the end, he concluded it was even better this way, and he smiled as he considered the hundreds of recruits about him. He forced his way through them, and as he did, he was pleased to hear over and over that the man should be crowned King of the Jews. Cleopas imagined this large crowd turned into soldiers enlisted to bring about the vengeance of the Lord. Young, old, rich, poor, male, and female soldiers, all of them ready to follow him, who they thought should be their ruler.

It was rather easy for Cleopas to recognize the supposed future king of Israel. Roughly twelve men and three women had made a circle around their master. Cleopas watched him from some distance away. He could not help but chuckle quietly at the charcoal-haired man who donned a homemade robe down to his knees and camel-hair sandals. How could such an ordinary person have such control over the masses? Carefully and with some difficulty, Cleopas crept closer to the rabbi.

As Cleopas observed the rabbi from less of a distance, the feelings of mockery vanished. For some reason that Cleopas never managed to figure out, he felt unsure. A sense of insecurity that he had not

experienced around Roman soldiers or felt when thinking of storming the temple or when beating someone up—all the insecurity he never felt before—suddenly fell upon him. Cleopas could now not come any closer. He decided to keep his current distance, close enough to hear but far enough to avoid Jesus looking him in the eye.

The rabbi spoke of the blessedness of the poor in spirit, of those who mourn, of those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, of the merciful, of the pure in heart, of those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and of the meek, because they will inherit the earth, just like the peacemakers, who will be called “children of God.” Cleopas felt trapped by the rabbi's serene tone of voice that brought warmth into his heart. The certain yet soft words tossed Cleopas back and forth, much the way a storm would rock a boat in the Sea of Galilee. He listened attentively as the rabbi explained that if someone slaps you on your right cheek, you should turn the other also, and that you should love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat and persecute you.

Cleopas was breathless.

He felt weak.

He could not approach such a man.

The words he heard burned in his mind. With them swirling in his heart, Cleopas decided to return to Jerusalem. Except this time, instead of following the Jordan, he fled into the desert. When night fell upon him, the cold made him tremble, but he had no desire to find refuge or lodging. He felt dirty, filthy. The words he had heard crawled on his skin, and in the itching they caused, he doubted for the first time ever his life's purpose. And every time he thought about his many outrageous actions, a sharp pang, like one might feel when a knife's blade scrapes against the heart, disturbed him. That night, it rained in the desert for the first time in exactly three decades, seven years, and twelve months. Cold, penetrating water sunk deeply into him. Stunned by the cold, the rain, and the inner torment, Cleopas felt a weight on him as

large as it is said Egypt's pyramids are. A pressure as strong as Lebanon's cedars made him sink and kneel, crawl up like a child within his mother's womb. In that position, under the crushing rain of a freezing night in Judea's desert, Cleopas remembered something he had heard that Jesus had said: that unless a man is born again, out of water and spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. For the first time that night, Cleopas dared look up. He felt a profound sense of peace when he saw the morning's first light.

Three days later, now free from his eternal anguish, he walked into Jerusalem. He looked around, saw the merchants with their oriental perfumes, the soldiers with their northern spears, the Jews with their identity crisis. There was nothing left for him in this place, the city of his youth. Everything he had known and everyone he had associated with now felt like a dream that slowly began to fade in his memory.

A few days later, Eleazar went by Cleopas's house. He clapped his hand, but no one answered. He called loudly, but no one opened. Carefully, he opened the door and slipped in. The only thing he found was four walls, a table, and a mattress on the floor. Neither Eleazar nor any other Zealot who knew Cleopas ever heard of him again. They never got word that Cleopas bar Simon had taken his meager material possessions, traveled to Galilee, and followed the Master. He followed with resolve for the rest of his life, a life that came to an end several decades later, tied to a cross on a hill in Rome in front of the tearful eyes of his wife and three daughters, one week after finding out that Titus finally had flattened Jerusalem.

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