

The Wedding at Cana

Listen –the sound of women in a kitchen. The scene makes you smile; brings to your throat a murmur of recognition; the sound of bodily knowing. This is a place you don't have to reach to understand. Your being dances easily to the rhythm of their speech, never mind that the words are foreign. Your soul sways to the beat of pots and hearts put to good use, lurches with their movements, getting ready, getting ready...

Chopping, spicing, mixing and waiting. These are the sounds of life being readied for Life.

Look closely now: they are four. Three are young: eager, unsure, excited and watching. And the fourth – a crone. A wise and wiseled face that crinkles easily into laughter. She works slowly, deliberately, favouring one hip. From time to time you can observe the passing of pain across the apple-doll face. A wrong movement, her mouth twists, and only then do you see the scar, a long, thin line, slithering purple against her smoky brown skin. Listen now, if you have ears. There is much to be heard.

“There now, that’s enough for now. Let’s sit a while. The apples need to soak up the wine. The haroset can’t be hurried, and my old joints need a rest. There was a day when I could work and work from morning ‘til night, then dance instead of sleeping. Ah well.

Rivkah, bring water to rinse our hands, please. Thank you my daughter. Good. Very good. Now let’s take our ease while we wait. And look – I saved out the best apples for us to eat right here. Take one, and let’s sit down – this one is mine.

She takes an apple from the basket, holding it in cupped hands, a jewel; an offering. The young women are watching, as though in the presence of something holy. Smiling, the old woman lifts the fruit to her face, inhales noisily, then polishing it on her generous bosom, begins to speak again.

“Deborah- tell us about your sister’s wedding. Such excitement – only three weeks away now! Mine? But I’ve told you that story so many times! Will you never tire of hearing it? Very well – I will tell it again, and it will bless me three times to do so. The first blessing will be to visit once more the day that changed my life. The second blessing, my young sisters, is that in the telling, I will take you there with me.

The woman is playing with the apple now, throwing it in the air and catching in again. She is leaning forward, sandaled feet flat on the stony floor, and under her robe, her legs are splayed in the unselfconscious posture of women who are at home. Her hands, on the folds of her robe, are resting between her knees, and cupped, as for a blessing. The tossing of the fruit continues for a time, as though the rise and fall of the apple might recreate the story. Suddenly she stops the motion, fixing her eyes on the fruit. One side is more crimson than the other, polished and reflecting the lamplight. She raises her eyes to the young women, who have been waiting, transfixed by the apple’s motion and by anticipation of the story they know so well; that both thrills then and makes them afraid.

Pardon me? Oh yes, the final blessing. That, my dear ones, I leave for you to discover, once the tale has told itself, and we have come out on the other side.

Susanna, don't throw that apple out. Here, bring it to me. One bad spot doesn't ruin the whole fruit. I don't care what the priests say! Here, I'll bite it out for you.

The woman's teeth are uneven. When she bites into the apple, the pale flesh of the fruit makes them seem almost caramel coloured in contrast. She spits the offending bruise into her palm, wipes the juice from her chin with the back of an olive-skinned hand, and passed the apple back to the young woman who has watched with astonished and delighted eyes.

Don't let the rotten parts keep you from enjoying the rest. Don't ever do that, Susanna.

The girls draw nearer. The room smells of fruit, and spices, and of women who have been working hard. The sounds have quieted now, the women's breathing, the old woman's voice, and a faint rustling that perhaps is the skirts of a grand story about to unfold.

The night before my wedding I had a dream. I was in my parents' orchard, the place as familiar to me as any in the world. It was a beautiful day, and the fruit was ripe. Pomegranates, figs, grapes, apples... I remember that because when I told my mother the next day, she said that to dream of pomegranates before my wedding was a sign of many children to come.

She sighs, turns the apple around on its stem, bites thoughtfully into the blossom end, and continues, speaking as she chews.

I remember because of the pomegranates, but there is another, more confusing part. I was hungry in my dream, hungrier than I ever remember being. I knew where the best tree was, the one near the centre of the orchard. All of us who worked there recognized its fruit as the sweetest and best. I swam to the tree. Yes, I swam. It was now underwater. Dreams do that, and it's useless to ask why. I swam to that tree, but when I looked, it had been cut down, and only a stump remained. The water had turned a strange colour, as though it were mixed with blood, or wine... Then I awoke, swimming upward to the surface of my wedding day. Isn't that strange? What do you make of it, my sisters? Deborah, would you please stir the haroset? Thank you.

The girls, familiar with the symbolism of the pomegranate, and growing wise to the ways of men and women together, flush at the thought, and at the natural way the woman speaks of these things. They giggle, catching each others' eyes, and hurry to help Deborah with the task. Soon, though, they turn back; eager to hear the story continue.

Over the years I've learned to trust my dreams. I know they speak with a real voice. But then, that morning so long ago, I could only listen to the women who came early to our home to waken me to begin my wedding day. In truth, I was already awake. How could I not be! But it was the custom that the day of a girl's wedding, the women of the town would go to her chamber, take her from her mat, and help her prepare. That custom has fallen by the wayside now, perhaps some still observe it, but here, it is done no more. I think we've lost something, I truly do.

She stops again, chewing the apple. After a time the girls can stand it no more. "Tell us about the dance!" one coaxes. "Yes, and the oil. I love the part about the oil." The crone's eyes sparkle with amusement.

I'm getting to that, my doves. Slowly, don't rush me. Give an old lady a chance to live it all over again. Where was I? Ah yes, the women who came to take me from my bed. What a noise they made! Never in all my twelve years had I heard such things! They bathed me, massaged fragrant oil on my limbs, and braided my hair, all the while talking and talking more, telling me the secrets of being a married woman. I blushed. I wanted to hear those things, and yet I didn't. But no matter, because willing or not, this was my wedding day. I was swept up in it all. *I was to be married*, and it didn't occur to me that anything else could or should be. I was to be the wife of Simeon, and together we would work in the orchards, grow old, and enjoy many children. Nothing else mattered then. When the bracelets were placed on my wrists, and my robe tied about my waist, we were ready. I was taken outside to join the guests who were already beginning to gather, dressed in their best and eager for the celebration to begin. It was time for the dance. Is this the part you like best? Well I don't blame you. I liked that part best too. Until that day I had only watched from the sidelines as the women performed this sacred wedding ritual. As little girls, my friends and I would thrill to the sounds and sights of the dance, giddy with the thought that some day...*some day*... it would be us. I knew the movements by heart; the bride in the middle of a circle of her mothers and aunts and grandmothers, surrounded by them in every way. My own lips could recite the words of their song, and I had longed for the day when I would join that circle. And now, that day had arrived. I was in the circle – at its very centre. It was real. It was *me* in that circle. It was me. Leah, ...I remember her so well...Leah picked up her hand harp. The women moved into position, taking me by the arm, leading me to the centre. Leah sounded the opening notes of the song and the women began to sway. At first, their movements were slow, tentative, the music and the dancers approaching one another shyly, as lovers on the wedding night. But soon, like true lovers, their bodies knew, and found the place where music and dancers become one. They circled around me, feet thump-thumping the rhythm of mystery; the swish and rattle of beaded skirts singing the song I had always known. I moved too, circling in the opposite direction, as the dance prescribes. The women became a blur, faces, scarves, voices, skirts, the sight and sound and smell of them thick like honey coating every part of me. Flowing on and on. I could no longer distinguish their individual faces. And as I turned and turned, I kept my eyes open to the rush and river of their faces whirling past me – a woman river – intoxicating...sweet and sweaty and deep, and I never wanted it to stop. It seemed as though all our foremothers were there in the circle too. Perhaps they were – what do you think?

The young bride, now an old woman, lets the question be. It hangs there like an apple, ripe for the hungry. A few seconds pass, and the girls play their role: ladies in waiting; bridesmaids at the union that is consummated each time the story is told.
"Tell us more – then what happened?"

The dance came to a premature halt. That's what happened. It was stopped by the arrival of two of my father's servants, who motioned us to be still. Their faces were tight with fear. We were still catching our breath and smoothing down our rumpled skirts, when my brother Jacob followed, and soon told us what was happening.

“It’s the cursed Romans” he said, and spat into the dust that still had not settled beneath my wedding slippers. “A new cohort of them, spying. Wanting to show how powerful they are. They are accusing us of disturbing the peace.” He looked at me then, and the fury in his eyes softened to a mute helplessness. “I think it would be wise for us to obey. I’m sorry, Phoebe” He turned and walked away. The only sound was the slapping of his sandals against the flat, cold stones of the walkway toward the town gate. No one moved for what seemed like a lifetime. Then my mother and aunties began to clear away our things, their eyes darting to the gate over and over again. Their movements were measured, and they carefully avoided the hem of my gown, where tiny cymbals had been sewn in for the dance and only moments ago had been jingling our joy. They were still now.

It was in this silence that we made the procession to the rest of the wedding feast. As we passed the town gate, I could see them at the end of the open field. The Roman soldiers. No more than boys, leering, smirking at their childish victory.

I was wearing my veil, of course. I remember how they looked through its haze. There they were, their small, sad weapons at their sides, the mountains behind them and the sun preparing to set.....they seemed inconsequential...and not quite all there. The light was playing with them. You know how the last rays of the sun are always the most sweet? Amber and thick, like honey? It was like that. The sun’s lavish and painful parting gift before the night brings its own deeper blessing? That’s the kind of light we walked in at that moment. Walked, in the slanted light, to my wedding. It dripped sideways from the purple hills and covered everything: covered us, covered those smirking pitiful boys. Their edges blurred into the hills; as though some inner light bled out even from them, in spite of themselves and mixed with the golden syrup of the twilight’s mischievous grace. Unaware, they gripped their swords. One spit into the sand. It would make a good story to tell to the rest of their regiment; how they had stopped a “Jew wedding”.

The old woman sits silently. With the nail of one index finger she breaks the skin of the apple in her hand. It makes a tiny curved wound, oozing juice. Then another. And another. Finally, she continues.

We arrived at Simeon’s home without incident. The vows were taken; the veil lifted, and the feasting began. Quieter than we might have been, it’s true, and the young men took turns watching at the gate to see if the soldiers would return, but even so, it was a fine feast. The soldiers stayed away, and soon, conversation flowed as freely as the wine. As the day lengthened and evening came, lamps were lit. The golden pools of lamplight worked their magic. Food was shared, and stories told, blessings and good wishes poured over our heads, and for a time, we almost forgot. Eventually, talk got around to the value of the season’s crop and how the Roman army was demanding more and more of the produce for itself. Of course, that led to the incident earlier in the day. I listened as they discussed a very familiar topic: what to do in the face of the occupation of our land. Some believed that revolution was the only way. They had caches of weapons hidden in the caves outside of town, stockpiling them against the day when they would act. Others voiced caution, still others a life of internal resistance and prayer. It was confusing. What was the will of our Creator; how do God’s faithful people behave in moments like these? It was the words of Jeshua and his mother who impressed me most, though. They sat together, surrounded by several guests, both women and men. I can’t remember everything that they said, other than one line that changed my life. It was...let’s see now if I can remember...

She pauses coyly, lifts her eyes to her waiting audience who are more than ready to give her the refrain they have heard from her lips so often.

“The inside and the outside are one!” they chimed.

Just so, she beamed. Just so. His was an invitation to join what is inside with what is outside. Marry them: the personal and the political; spirit and matter. Divine and human. These things are one, and let no one rend them asunder, he said. All of creation is groaning with desire, yearning for this union. The desire and its fulfilment are also one. This is the truth – this is the core. They are one, and the oneness has a name. .

She stops short, eyes sparkling as she watches the young women thrill to the sound of the truth. She looks at the remnant of the apple she has been eating as she talks; a small round core, all the flesh consumed. This she pops into her mouth and swallows, whole. After a few delicious moments she shifts her legs beneath the skirts of her robe, wrapping her arms around her knees, and resumes the tale.

We talked long into the night. The food and wine were gone, the guests sated and mellow, listening to Mariam and Jeshua in the light of the dimly burning lamps. They were telling story after story; taking turns picking up the narrative, like a dance they had done many times before. Each knew the steps, and let each other take turns taking the lead. Hilarious tales that seemed innocent enough, until you listened beneath the words, where worlds exploded and danger and hope pulsed side by side. The wedding guests were transfixed, laughing until the tears ran down their faces. From time to time Jeshua would stop, saying “you’ve heard enough from us. Isaac – you tell us one” “Just one more” someone would say, and they’d be off again, eyes sparkling like the first day of creation, and we’d be taken to another place by the words.

Suddenly two of my cousins burst into the tent.

“They’re coming again!” They were breathing hard from running, and from fear. Behind them, the length of the first olive grove away, marched several soldiers, stepping out a sickening staccato toward the wedding tent. A dozen of them pushed their way to the centre of our gathering, and hissed a foreign greeting. The leader leaned forward, toward my father, teeth bared in what could never be mistaken for a smile. “We have come to celebrate with you” he said, mimicking our dancing posture. His comrades barked out shrill laughter. “Will you not offer us some wine?”

No one moved. The truth was, the wine was gone. We had none to offer. My stomach tightened with fear.

A few seconds passed, not more, but it seemed forever. The soldier looked around the room, then turned to me, drew a small sword, and...

The old woman’s hand goes to her face, touches the small purple scar that might never be seen if you didn’t know where to look; if you didn’t know this story.

“Such a lovely bride” I still remember the smell of him, the thick sound of that foreign voice and the way his hand touched my cheek. “It would be a shame if anything should happen to this pretty face. Will no one give us wine? Are you sure?” I was paralysed with fear. I could hear the silence.

The next part is confused; I have pictures, frozen, in my mind. Feelings, moments, none joined together.: A sound; like the rustling of wings. My Auntie Mariam whispering to Jeshua; Jeshua whispering back.

She is far away. One old finger caresses the scar, a silver ring captured at its base by a swollen knuckle. In precisely the same way, her memory caresses the moment she will never forget. Somewhere, a puppy yips and children squeal. The sound doesn't reach the chalice in which this moment is being held. While the young women wait, the old woman does what old women do. Finally she continues.

Yes, it was his voice. A word. It seemed to come from nowhere. It pierced the side of the beast and let loose something primal, shining and sticky with possibility. Only one word. "Wait!" He said "wait", and the word sliced the moment in two. The soldier stopped, pressed the blade of his sword a bit more deeply into the flesh of my cheek. It was to let me know what he could do, if he chose. Then, with a grunt, he removed it and turned toward Jeshua. My blood on the tip of his weapon sparkled in the lamplight; a twisted and ravenous jewel.

Jeshua stepped forward, his face unreadable, and stared the soldiers down. "There is wine" he said. "Let me serve you."

With blood dripping from my face onto the folds of my marriage robe, I waited, holding my breath. A finger of time passed. Another. Soldiers exchanged dubious looks. Finally, the leader shrugged, wiped the weapon in the dirt, and moved toward Jeshua.

The woman rises with difficulty, grunting softly and grasping the arm of one young girl, eyes fixed on some distant place. She moves toward the fire, where the haroset simmers, soaking in the spices. She picks up a spoon, and begins to stir the fragrant mixture in tight circles. The spoon makes scraping noise on the bottom of the pot; she doesn't notice. She hums a fragment of a song the girls do not recognize; this story is going places it has not gone before. They are eager to follow; and a bit afraid.

Finally, she rests the silver spoon on the side of the pan. Thick liquid drips, sticky and red, into the fire. It sizzles, releasing the smell of hot sugar and smoke.

"I swear to you"

She speaks first to the stove, then whirls more quickly than one might imagine she could. Her eyes are suddenly very clear and present. Her body takes on the posture of the young. From far away, the veil has been lifted; torn in two. She is unaware that she is standing, framed in the girls' vision by an open window where the fig trees are heavy with fruit, and the sky is darkening. Soon it will rain.

"I swear to you it was a miracle! I have no explanation for what happened. Time after time in the days to come I asked what had happened at the other end of that room. One moment we had no wine and the next – more than we could measure. I don't know how, I only know that it is so. And that somewhere in the midst of what happened was Jeshua. Jeshua, and Mariam, and their stories. It was as though the tales they had told around the fire flowed into the jars of water and delivered on a vow we only dimly knew had been pledged among us. Where once there had been

no wine, now there was enough, and to spare. This is all I know. Others have been consumed by trying to explain it all, but for me....

She takes a breath then; winded from the exertion of the tale. She sits back down, and sighs again. The girls notice the sound of it; fluttering and wet, something thick, deep in her throat that needs to come out. They exchange worried glances, but the woman doesn't notice. She is smiling, still somewhere else. She speaks again, this time into the fire.

For me....what I remember most was Jeshua at my side. He broke off some leaves from the flowers on the table, crushed them in some olive oil, mixed in his own spittle, and held the salve against my cheek. What stays with me now is the sound of his voice. An ordinary voice, really, but it touched something inside me – reaching a me I didn't know I was. His words got inside me, down where things were twisted and tangled and silent and afraid. That's where the real things live, you know. That's where the words have to reach. And His did.

I was whimpering; the soldiers had left and I felt safe to breathe, to feel the pain. He worked calmly, talking all the while, to soothe me I suppose. Mariam was busy by the gate, with another casualty of the soldiers' little party. Jeshua stayed with me, He gestured to the salve – or was it the wine? “A little something my mother learned in Egypt” he smiled. . “She taught me everything I know. The potion will do its work, and you have to do the rest. Do you understand?” I didn't, but I nodded anyway. He leaned closer. I could smell him: wood smoke and sweat, and something else I couldn't identify; something foreign. He leaned close, looked directly into my eyes.

Trust me, the inside and the outside are one. And – Salome? The best is *always* yet to come. The choicest morsel saved for last.”

And – how shall I tell you – what happened inside me then - it was like what happened when Simeon and I entered our wedding tent for the first time. A coming together that was earthy and heavenly and the two had become one and the release had power to shake the world.

A shocked giggle brings the woman – Salome is her name – back to the present. It has been too much for the young girls, who have never heard her speak this frankly before. They want her to stop. And they want more for her to go on. To their relief and disappointment, the spell has been broken. Salome stands again, and her body stoops once more. The youthful energy the story had spun, now spent, as it should be, leaving a stain on the spirits of four women about to enter their lives. Together, the women, three so young and one so very old, take the haroset to the table. Later the rest will gather; the broken women Salome gathers about her like baby chicks; those with no one to care for them; with no place to go. She will gather them under the wings of her table; she will mix leaves and oil and spittle to help them heal; she will break the bread and lift the cup. Once again they will take into themselves the old, old wine that is as young as the blood of their own hearts; beating inside and out.