

Dear Ruth,

Ruth, my sister, my heart! Praise to the Holy One! Blessed be the name of the One whose moon bathes us; feeds us, with the same milky light! Thanks to God, and to you, for this most welcome epistle (written in your own hand! I confess I lowered my head and sniffed it for some trace of your scent – the close, animal smell of the thing did not give up your fragrance but in my mind I saw your own dear fingers forming the letters and leaving some of yourself on the scroll.)

For the safe journey of the messenger who delivered it to me, I thank our God. And I trust that She who is Light unto the feet of travelers will guide this messenger back to you with my own letter and this small gift which I enclose. (Do you still like water-polished stones? I think of you every time I find one especially beautiful on the shore. This one reminds me of the lamb we nursed to health that summer....can you see in the shape what I mean? Ah I'm afraid I've sunk into the well of childish memory. I knew you would understand.)

I wept as I read each word upon your scroll, even as I weep now in the responding. They are tears of joy as well as sorrow, and there is so very much to tell. Strange and sparkling things have been happening to me of late....

Ruth, - it is as though the very air around me has been expanding these last courses of the moon; filled with things more astounding than ever I though could be. And no one close by who would understand! No one with whom to whisper the secrets that have been filling my days. I have buried them away in some dark, warm place within my bosom, as we used to hide our small treasures under the apple tree in the centre of that orchard, do you remember? I have been holding everything tightly, and too close to myself. Until your letter arrived I had not known how much it cost me to do so. Of all the things I lost when you left, the most precious to me was the simple trust that if ever I fell you would catch me; the sweet knowing that in someone's heart I came first and would ever be held in the Light. To say that I ached for that loss in the days after our parting is to misspeak the truth by far, but these are the only words I have. To know; to be certain that you would understand me; that my words would find a soft and safe place in your ears. To have lost that is beyond my tongue or quill to capture. Shall I tell you the mystery that has visited me of late?

I scarcely know where to begin. This muddle in my mind is partly for jubilation that again I have someone to share it with – **my sister** – the only one in the world who would understand. So often I have longed for your ear to hear me into speech....your bosom upon which to cast my doubts and fears....and your eyes, in which I see reflected my....my... *myself*. There has always been a way in which my deepest thoughts and feelings seem not quite real to me until they are reflected back to me in you. Perhaps that sounds fanciful, does it? – Am I becoming maudlin in my final years? Perhaps so. But I speak from the place in me that knows the truth, and this is what I offer to you now.

Most recently, the longing for you took shape in strange ways; as though, as though something or Someone were courting my attention from a place nearby, yet

unavailable to me without your presence. It began with a dream, exactly three times the fullness of the moon ago. In the dream, Ruth, this is what happened: Naomi walked as she did when she was young. Her steps were sure; her skin smooth, her face the healthy colour of roasted figs. In her arms, she carried a bundle. At first I thought it was a child, swaddled and carried against her bosom. When I approached, she lifted the cloth away, and showed me what lay within its folds. It was a fish. Squirring, slimy, glass-eyed, and stinking. It smiled at me, though, and said “It doesn’t matter now”. And then, the dream was gone.

I awoke with the images sharp on my heart – disturbed, and yet....does this sound too strange, sister? Somehow it seemed - right. As though she had given me a gift, some message that my heart had received as a joy, even though my thoughts still reached to understand. What does it mean? What am I to make of this dream?

Isn’t it interesting, Ruth – when I hear stories from the priests here in Moab, when I read the sacred writings and hear tales from the faith you have claimed as your own, isn’t it striking how often the Holy One comes to the ancient ones in dreams? Their messages seem clear, direct. “Tell the people thus and so” the dream says to the dreamer, and it is so. “Leave your home and travel to a far country”. Easy to understand, if not to accomplish. Never once, until this dream that I report to you now, *never once* did the Holy One betray a preference for a choice in *my* life, nor, I daresay, in yours. To leave Moab or not? To stay with Mother and do my duty? To follow my heart and go with you and Naomi? The choices were ours to make, unaided, or unimpeded, by Divine dreams or visions. Forgers of our own destinies, you and I.

Very well, I used to say, I can live in the unknowing. Let the dreamers have their assurance. As for me, the needs of the present moment and my own uncertain wisdom are enough. And then came that dream with its talking fish!

Was it a message? If so – what? For the first time, I wondered what it would be like to live with the firm conviction that some people seem to have when it comes to matters of faith.

Since then, it’s as though some truth is fluttering against the curtain of my awareness. It happened again the morning I took our produce to market. We left the night before, and camped on the high hill. You remember that place we used to hide, and the cave and the naughty name we had for the rock formation at the top? It’s still there. I smiled to my self as we settled in for the night, thinking of you. Just before dawn I awoke with the cold. My breath formed mist in the air, and as the wisps of my breathing took shape before me, it seemed there was more to them than my own breath. Those frosty feathers seemed to hang too long in the air, and in the hanging, give temporary shelter to the message – or messenger – meant for me.

In a hundred other ways I’ve felt a Presence with me these last days. Just beyond; tickling the edges of my knowing. And so it was, that when I saw the camel approaching

and the runner ahead of them, announcing that they came from Bethlehem, it all fell into place. I knew in an instant that it was from you, and I knew what it would say, and – Does this sound too strange? I knew that the one who had been at my side, trying to break through this hardened shell all this time, was Naomi herself. You say she died at the fullness of the moon – and that was exactly when I had my dream, Ruth! And in the days since her death, and in the dreaming time into which I seem to have entered, many things have become clear to me. She is here with me - of that I have no doubt.

I try to imagine in what form she might come to me next, if I can only keep porous enough to allow her entry. As a dream, as frosty breath...and still I am unable to discern her message. I smile at what the must think of me now; ever the daughter who chooses to turn back. Is that what I am doing yet again? Turning back from her? I can feel her close now: the thick syrup of her soul, distilled by time to a mere dribble, a sweet condensed drop in what once was an overflowing bucket.

How unlike our own mother, Ruth. I don't know if you knew this, but as I nursed mama through her sad life and especially in her final illness, she grew ever larger. It was as though she would eat the world! The older she grew, the more intense in her was the craving for something sweet. Her hunger had no end; nor did her need for the power that comes from making others feel small. I have often wondered how, or if, those two things merge. While I have known many women whose bodies and appetites are huge, often their hearts are large as well; compassionate and open. Our mother, on the other hand, wore her flesh like a weapon, adding to her body's arsenal until she could barely move, and wielding her immobility as men wield the sword.

She went to be with the ancient ones unwillingly, and in great pain. We washed her and cared for her body in the way our people do, and I pray she has found peace she never knew in this world. I do know that as I bathed her body in the end, there was, on her face, an expression of surprise...as though she had let go of something that had been both a curse and a comfort to her, and she had been astounded by how easily it had slipped from her hand, shocked into pleasure at what lay beyond the grasping.

There is some small comfort in this: as I removed her things from her chamber, I found among them surprises that came as small redemptions: a few of the childish gifts we had given her when we were little, for example. I was so sure she would have dismissed and discarded them the way she seemed to dismiss and discard us! But no, she had kept them all this time. Her wedding shawl - wrapped around a tiny beaded bird. I had never seen that bird before, but it was old, Ruth, and I had no idea that she treasured – well – that she treasured anything at all. I can't say it gave me peace to find them, or that they helped me understand her any more than I did before, but ...the discovery does add scraps of colour to the torn and ragged fabric of her life, which seemed to me so dull, full of stains and rough with shadow.

In the end, I have no regrets at having stayed to care for her. Perhaps this is the gift our beloved Naomi has come to tell me, because it was only as the words left my quill just now that I knew they were true. For years, my heart returned again and again to

the day we each chose which way to go. I couldn't let it go – had I made the right decision? Endlessly, I relived our early lives, when love and trust were natural and easy; when all things seemed possible in spite of mother's illness (and it WAS an illness wasn't it?) and when the grief and doubts of the future were still unknown to us. I imagined what you must think of me now – a coward? A traitor? Worthy of only pity, or something worse? I wondered what life would have been like had I chosen the other course and gone with you.

I have long thought about how different it must be for you. To be the one who leaves...that is very different than to be the one who stays behind, even though it be by choice. The cost is calculated with a different scale, it seems to me. What shall it be – guilt for you; resentment for me? Too much distance for you; too much proximity for me? We each pay the price of our choice, and part of the cost is the haunting spectre of what might have been had we chosen differently. But that is what it is to live in this world, Ruth. It is the price we pay for freedom; the terrible and beautiful freedom of being human and being alone to choose.

The truth is, I did what I did and that's all there is to it. I have no regrets. And now, I am writing to you of things that have been buried so deep, they tear at my chest as I pull them out and onto this scroll. I will feel lighter for having them on the outside!

I will send this with my small gift by way of the returning messenger, and pray that this will be the beginning of more contact in this way, and perhaps – it makes my heart beat too quickly even to think it may be so – perhaps a visit from you when the messenger returns.

Take heart, my sister – and receive this with all the love I can send. May El Shaddai bless and keep you in the palm of Her hand.