

Peter

'The Rock' he called me, a foundation stone. Maybe he meant blockhead. I feel about as rocklike as a pile of fish guts tonight. Sick, drowning, like that time on the sea, but he's not there. It started so well, riding like that ahead of us, through the Golden Gate, even, like a king. Throwing all the market stalls and money-changers' tables all over the place.

Then that strange supper, like it was Shabbos and Passover all rolled into one, but neither one of them. Him on his knees like a slave washing our feet and me, as usual, making an ass of myself. That stuff about sharing out his body and blood as he blessed the bread and wine. Judas slipping out on an errand after more weird remarks.

He always likes/liked to go off alone to pray, and he took me and a couple of others along across the valley to the olive grove. He seemed to be wrestling with some huge question for ages. I kept nodding out. He woke us up, sad we weren't awake. Fitful sleep again.

Lots of noise, torches, crowd, armed police trying to grab him after Judas turned up and kissed him. Bloody traitor! Fighting and shouting. I sliced some boy in palace kit—always have my fishing knife with me. Cities are dangerous. He told me to drop it and fixed the kid's ear. The police dragged him off.

The rest of the night is a blur. Me trying to sneak into the courtyard—about as subtle as letting a bull loose in the Temple. Big clumsy me, obviously in the wrong place. The serving girls sussed the accent. Glimpses of himself, hands tied, exhausted, battered, already looking half-dead. Pre-dawn light makes everything look unreal as a rooster crows—or too real. He looks over and catches my eye and I want to vomit. Foot-in-mouth-Peter, only this time I can't fix it.

I slide out the gate just wanting to die, or at least get blind drunk, but not even the Romans open up this early. Just as well. I'd only be sick again.

More commotion, and a squad of police drag him away again. Somebody says they're heading for Roman HQ and I follow. The crowd is sounding ugly, and the guards at the Praetorium are worse. They flog him and curse him and ram a circle of thorns onto his head. Oh, right, they're mocking the so-called King of the Jews. Pilate shows him off to the crowd, which bays for his blood like a pack of hounds. An old army cloak covers his wounds for the minute.

For a second, I see him like they see him, a fool, a wanna-be Caesar looking worse than any filthy begging leper. I start to yell with them, but bile rising in my throat hauls me back. This is Jesus. My friend. My teacher. My Lord.

They rip the cloak away, tearing his skin again, and load a beam onto his ruined shoulders. The crowd follows like vultures. He falls more than once. The soldiers pick some random bloke to carry the beam—it is obvious Jesus can't by now. Some woman wipes his face, I glimpse his mother as they exchange a glance before he is shoved along.

I want to leave. To run and hide and forget I ever knew him. Can't do it. I keep following out of the gate towards the old quarry. Hard to see from the back of the pack, but the sound of the nails going in makes it all quiet for a second. He and the other two are hoisted up. Are any of the others there? Mary and a couple of other women, and a man.

It's John. The youngest, and Jesus' special friend turns out to be the bravest of us all. Not me. I'm at the end of my rope, sick, exhausted, stumbling away as fast as I can. It's a sick cosmic joke, that. He's dying horribly, all beat up beyond recognition, and I can't take any more?

Suddenly it hits me I'm not running away from him. I'm running from me. My cowardice, my stupidity, myself. Leaning against a wall all I can bring up is a dry heave.

I've managed to make it to Ezra's workshop before I collapse, sobbing and filthy in a dark corner. A cold sweat comes over me...is it a sign his soul is free of the tortured mess of his body and his cowardly friends?

The light is fading. Someone runs in and tells us that posh fellow Joseph has claimed his body and put it in his own tomb. Brave to do that. He's one of the council or something. If anybody ever tells this story it will be John and him and the women who come off best. And nobody will tell it as horrible as it is. How could they know it and feel it? They weren't here.

Ezra drags me to the well and sluices the filth off me. Time to greet the Sabbath. And it's Pesach as well. How can I be joyful when all our hopes are dead in a borrowed grave? Maybe the old prayers will soothe me like a lullaby comforts a sick child. Maybe Passover...wait...he said something about three days. But my brain and my gut are too sore and exhausted to remember. Maybe later. Maybe. But now it just hurts like Sheol.