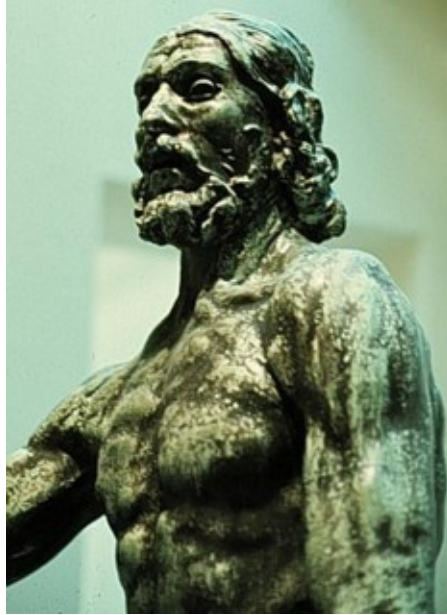


Chapter III

The Burden of All Emotion

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, "He has a demon."
- Jesus



John the Baptist Preaching, Auguste Rodin

Only in a life so tattered from the start could a child sit in silence and, understanding nothing, see into the eyes before her, and know she was safe. The diamond-eyed lover of a God, he held the burden of all emotion in his eyes, the coal blackness hardened to the finest quality of light, honed into a gaze that withered the proudest souls of men. His barrenness broke the hearts of most, he stood so spare. His was a finely tuned countenance. Of course you did just what any child would, you cursed his eyes and tried to spit; or was spit too dear to you?

There was no hesitation in his movement, as he bound your broken legs and staunched the flow of blood. What is left when your body and mind are both broken at the same moment? *Spirit*. The spirit takes over the functions of the body, and gives the mind time to mend. This happened when you opened your eyes to the blinding sun, and knew greater pain than your young imagination could ever have conceived.

He spends time in this desert, and he knows the landscape well enough to find the remedy needed to ease your pain. You sleep as if your little life depends on this state, and indeed it does. Tides of dreams sweep you in and out of sleep, but mostly you are held in darkness, and for this little while you give in and rest. When the sun shines in your dreams, you smile, and your savior watches, wondering where you travel while asleep.

Once the pain has ebbed, you awaken to another day alive, and know that to live you must drink water and find food somewhere. A day alive is a day of pain, but time will heal your wounds, or so your savior tells you. His gift of food and shelter are the offerings given to ease the pain, and water is a welcomed treat. But bathing is expected!

How can this be? you frown. To waste so much water is a sin of some kind, is it not?

Water was always available, just not to you, a child too small to haul it from the well alone. In small amounts, water is doled out to children who live in the streets of the city, but you are now a desert dweller,

just what you wanted.

The man you now thought of as your rescuer did now think of you as his responsibility, but he treated you as he treated himself, harshly from any point of view. He sought his nourishment from a different source. This man was devout in his religion and practiced it faithfully enough, but his radical point of view separated him from others of the same religion. He commanded a group of devoted followers who listened to every word he said. He used the words of God, given through the prophets to the people.

The great teacher had been prophesied to come again, when needed most. And everyone agreed that this was a time of need. The land was parched, the sky showed no sign of relief. The farmers were narrowly surviving. Soon the people of the cities would start to feel the grip of terror that drought brought upon them. A man could survive for a long time without food, but never without water. Thus the tension of the times had as much to do with weather conditions as it did with other fears, all coming to a head. The fear of ruin was never far from the minds of merchants, and taxes were never higher. The poor were underfed and overworked. The tradesmen had no one to produce their trades for, and thus had nothing to do with their hands and minds.

In the years to come, you were taken from one place to another, for this was a traveling man who had rescued you. His path was jagged and hard to travel for a man; for a child it was a ceaseless struggle to keep up not only the pace, but the will to remain alive. Your demeanor was courageous, but your crutch was self-made and pathetic. It held you upright, but without balance. You stumbled along, until one within the camp took it to heart to fashion for you a straight crutch. This was a gift you never truly comprehended, for you were by then frightened of any kindness. But you had learned very early to court the ones who fed you without rancor, and so you stayed with this band of learned men. They treated you with kindness (to the extent they knew). But they thought of you as a useless child with no future, and could never bring themselves to care for you beyond giving you the barest of essentials.

Onward now you travel together. Enough time has passed, and you have mended well. Still, to walk is hard, and no one wants to wait for you to catch up. And so he carries you, thinking you are hardly more than a baby after all. When night falls, he wraps you in his own robes, and safety you had never known before folds you into a silence that will last until the day breaks. This continues for some time - the longest walk you will ever know. In the years that will follow, this always remains a time for being with the one you come to think of as your Savior. Nothing else will do.

He listens to your words, although the words are strange; for you speak in many different languages, or so it seems. Sometimes he knows the truth is held within a tirade, as you scream out phrases only you can understand. The sounds you make are vaguely familiar in his mind. Sometimes, we listen to your voice speaking as if you are alone, and we laugh to hear you prattle on about the sins of those you have never even met. A *good* child would bear no false witness to the ones she now must serve to stay alive!

So on and on, he allows you a freedom which other children are not afforded in this time of a world coming apart at its very core. But differences gain interest, and interest stirs the pot.

Who is this strong-willed girl, always at the heels of our master now?

He took her to his bed again.

Only for a night of story telling!

But who is the teller? And who listens, ever so alert? Without fear of reprisal, you stand your ground for all to notice. And notice they do. They notice your favored position within the camp, they notice your favored sleeping robes, and they notice your words of criticism aimed at those who are allowed no such favoritism.

She is but a child he found half dead, and being without one of his own, he dotes upon her, that's all. Leave him to his own choices. His tantrums are as hard to handle as hers!

But into your life now there appears the tendril of a whispered word you have never before heard: *betrayal*. Yes, all who are in constant focus are deemed fair game, for to bring down one so favored would surely lead to a better place for others, always awaiting the attention of the master himself. This is now where we begin to speak with certainty of the details of these lives, now quite intertwined. One is seldom thought of without the other coming into sight. And this is never good news, as we see it.

The man is bronzed, and fevered in his approach. He carries an appeal that must be sent from God. His words are clipped with anger, for the smallest sin is tantamount to displeasure in the eyes of God. To save one's self is possible, and to repentant souls he grants an absolution.

Is he the Teacher, come again to help all seekers? Or is he a Prophet, standing in his own right, lending words that tell of better things to come? Listen!

Both are true, for all good teachers know their students well, and work according to the needs of the students at the time. They speak of a better way to know the truth as it unfolds, and in this they prophesy the coming of events that all the world awaits.

Our man did include your words in his. He thought you were connected to the afterlife. He knew that heaven was already within your grasp, but you did not gain entry; he had somehow kept you waiting at the gate. And now his teachings began to spread, growing along with his information.

Many came to assist him in the gift he bestowed upon his followers, the ritual bathing now called "baptism". Each day was a constant, faithfully consistent call to repent all sins of any color, any form, and any gravity. For all could be forgiven. In the eyes of God, all were of equal value. The days were long, and hardships were looked upon as gratefully accepted. But the grace of God was not always good to be around! You watched many come and leave again, always wondering at the crowds. Where did they come from, and where on earth did they go when the sun went down?

These were days of uninterrupted silence. No one spoke to you, until your Savior took you into his robes at night, and spoke of uncertainties in his own mind. He did not think you all-knowing, or even clever. But in your sleepy speeches, he could always find a thread that had escaped him, for but a moment, and in the morning he knew with his own certainty that which had eluded him. This was a custom well-established by the time his name was recognized in the ancient land with the ancient name, by the banks of the river Jordan.

For you, this was a time of plenty, if you think of plenty as just enough to survive. Our own man John was one who needed little to survive upon. And in his thoughts, you were as he was: so tuned into thoughts of God that there was nothing else you desired. This was harder than you can imagine when you were hungry, or when you needed a sandal repaired. You knew the difference between your world and the world that spun around you. During the long days at the river, you watched others eat at noon, or drink when they were thirsty. You saw the robes (some dirty, but robes nonetheless). Your dress was only a cloth, fashioned to form a covering to hide you from prying eyes. Yet it could have been a robe, if only you had asked for something more.

Wine was served in camp, but never to you, for he did not hold wine as pleasant to indulge his body with. Indeed his was a nature that indulgences had no hold upon. The man himself was as lean as a string of leather, tanned and softened into use, but only for one purpose - the spreading of the laws of baptism. He ate no food but that which he could find himself, for it was his custom to take only from his God. His robe was skin, the hide of a camel (or so the legend says). But indeed it was a hide, and this was tied 'round by his girdle of leather, meant to evoke thoughts of prophets that went before. The sight of him made men wonder at their own softness, as if this could be a source of displeasing the Lord as well!

So here we have a start to your story of a child who lived a life as one inside the robes of a man hidden by his name. The Baptist began his life with heralds announcing his birth, and with signs and wonders that all pointed the way. Did he listen to the calling? Did he play his role well?

Did he answer the question laid before him, as he stood erect and self-assured?

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