

...fragments from *THE OTHER MARY*

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Fragment I: Lighter As She Walked

His people were sitting in a rough circle around the fire pit they'd dug. Spread on two blankets was their morning meal of bread, dates, and figs, with hide-flasks of water. The men and the women sat together, though they were not of the same family, and that was improper, and the other Mary always had been proper. She sat stiffly. Jesus blessed the food and began to pass it around, and this too shocked the other Mary. Serving food was woman's work. Why was *he* doing it?

They began to eat. She was shy of joining in, but he pressed food and water upon her. No one asked her name or offered theirs. They spoke only the small formal words necessary for a meal, when passing the water-skins and the like, until suddenly he said, "What is like the Kingdom of God? To what can it be compared?"

His friends seemed to have expected something like this, but the other Mary was taken aback. And he went on, "The Kingdom of God is like a certain woman who was carrying a jar full of grain. While she was walking, still a little distance from her home, the handle of the jar cracked and the grain emptied out behind her upon the road. She didn't notice -- the crack hardly made a sound. She was thinking of this and that, so she didn't even notice that her burden became lighter as she walked. But when she reached her house and set the jar down, she found it empty.

"You who have ears -- may you hear."

Mary said nothing, nor did any of his friends, but she felt it was her story, as though this stranger had been speaking of her. Like the woman in the story, hadn't Mary thought her jar whole and full, and hadn't it really been cracked and leaking, and wasn't it now empty? The story seemed meant for her, meant to tell her that what she'd been experiencing was somehow good, even sacred -- though Mary didn't understand how, nor

how the woman and the empty jar were somehow like the Kingdom of God. “The Kingdom of God” was a towering phrase, it rose above her like a mountain, she’d never heard it before, she was almost afraid of it. For a moment when he’d told the story Jesus looked straight at her, into her, and that too was strange and new -- rabbis gave their teaching only to men. It was said that it was better to throw the Torah into a fire than to teach it to a woman. But he seemed to make no distinction between his hearers when he taught. Yet *was* he teaching? And was it of the Torah? It was only a story, and hardly even a story, but, yes, she’d thought she carried something full but had found unexpectedly that it was empty -- and, somehow, *that* was like the Kingdom of God? How could this be?

She walked with these wanderers all that day and the next, speaking to no one, but thinking and thinking, feverishly. And she thought:

There has to be an emptying; what you carry must be emptied; and it can’t be by your will, because then you wouldn’t be emptied, you’d still have your will; you must be emptied somehow, to be filled by God.

She wanted to cry out with joy, cry out with fear: *I’ve been emptied!*

Fragment II: Mary of the Seven Devils

Mary did not feel safe walking beside the Magdalene. She felt that even the rocks and clouds stared at them -- for the Magdalene walked today with hair unbound. When walking at Jesus’ side, the Magdalene had bound her hair like any decent woman. But walking now with Mary at the very end of their procession-like caravan of wanderers, the Magdalene’s exposed hair flowed all down her back. Mary had heard of women doing such things in far larger towns than she’d ever seen, and she supposed them harlots or Gentiles, but this was the first time she’d laid eyes on, much less walked beside, a grown woman with her hair down in public -- and this a woman he favored.

Until marriage, uncovered hair was permitted; after marriage, if a woman went about with unbound hair her husband would surely divorce her. If for some reason a woman never married -- because she had a deformity, perhaps -- she was expected to carry herself as one who had. As for divorced women -- if, like Mary, they were fortunate

enough to be accepted back into their families, they naturally observed the conventions. No family would take them back otherwise. So, married or not, the Magdalene should cover her hair. Mary wanted to tell her that, but could not. And the Magdalene's hair was itself a mystery. Her skin was youthful. She was not above twenty-five. But her hair was a heavy wavy mass of gray, silver, and white, shining swathes that fell below her waist. Though rich in texture, in color it was the hair of quite an old woman. Mary wondered if she walked beside a witch. But how then had the Magdalene escaped being stoned? For no one could flaunt witchery, or even the aspect of it, and live long.

Mary kept nervously adjusting her hair-scarf to make sure it was properly placed, though she knew that it was. The hair-scarves of women were loose, like all their clothing, really more cape than scarf, falling down the back, covering the skull but for the hairline at the forehead, where one could see no more than a slim band of hair above the brow. Sometimes Mary's adjustments would do more harm than good, revealing too much hair, and she'd feel with her fingers and adjust it again. She saw that this amused the Magdalene, who was pretending not to notice Mary's adjustments as Mary was pretending not to notice the Magdalene's cascading hair.

Finally the Magdalene said, "Do not worry so. It's only hair."

"May I ask you something?"

"To me you may say whatever you wish."

"Are you young -- or old?"

"Ah. That. I'm not sure. Well -- look at Jesus. He is twenty-nine. Yet elders bow before him. They don't want to, at least at first, but they do. Even those who disapprove. Even those who hate him."

"Hate him? Do many hate him?"

"Sometime during every day, everyone hates him."

To this Mary could only stammer, "I don't."

"You may."

"You?"

"Once, sometimes twice, a day. Well, look at us all! And we all tell the same story, again and again, as though still trying to believe it. Things are simple. Awful, for some of us, but simple. Or not simple, but -- life is a certain way and it won't change.

There's a kind of comfort in that. And then he comes along."

"Yes," Mary said. It seemed the one experience they all shared, the experience that bound them together. That, and how mightily they were attracted to him, and how they could not stop thinking about it all, turning it over and over in their minds, as one turns in a fever when neither asleep nor awake. It was nothing like life as she'd ever known or imagined it. It was a state of being in-between -- in between life and something else. It was no wonder they were always walking. With this restlessness, what else could they do? If they had to remain still, in one place, they'd have burst.

"Who are we anymore?" the Magdalene said. "I turned his favorite question upon him, I said, 'What are your disciples like and to what can we be compared?' He said, 'You are like little children playing in a field that is not yours.'"

Mary wondered silently: Am I a disciple?

The Magdalene had quoted his words very sadly. It was strange for Mary to hear that man's words in the Magdalene's voice. In his own voice his words sounded unassailable; it was easier to hear, in her voice, how with him an answer was often like another and richer question. And his words had the power to adhere to you, burn themselves into you, so you remembered them -- perhaps because what he said, what he seemed to mean, was always so unexpected.

Then the Magdalene said, "Matthew complained of all this running about, of being tired all the time. And Jesus said, 'When you've left behind all that cannot follow you, you'll find rest.'"

After a little while the Magdalene added, "And -- not then, another time -- there was something else he said: 'If you bring forth what's within you, what's within will save you. But if you do not bring forth what is within you? Then what you do not bring forth will destroy you.'"

Saying that, the Magdalene reached out and grasped Mary's hand -- as though for comfort, as though the words she'd quoted had hurt her. Their hands clasped each other easily and guilelessly. Not for the first time in her life Mary had a little vision: she saw the Magdalene and herself as two girls of about seven years, holding hands and kicking up the dust as they skipped; then as two very old women sitting on the ground in the shade of a tree, the hand of one resting easily upon the hand of the other.

They walked this way, the Magdalene and Mary, holding each other's hands perhaps tighter than they realized. Each found refuge in the other's grip. How strange to feel so safe and afraid at the same time. The two women walked just far enough behind the caravan so that the dust kicked up by the others settled before they walked into it. Mary was getting used to being always a little hungry, always a little thirsty, and always a little light-headed because of that.

"Is this what you do, is this all you do -- walk?"

The Magdalene smiled. "We walk, but he -- he goes, and things happen where he goes."

"But where do you go? Where are we going?"

"I don't know the answer. He may. If he does, he hasn't said. It's possible he doesn't know either. And I've thought -- well, Herod Antipas arrested the Baptizer, who stayed in one place and could be easily found. Jesus avoids the cities, strays all over the countryside, goes this way and that. If it gets into Antipas to arrest another prophet, Jesus isn't as easy to find as the Baptizer. By the time Antipas hears of him in one place he's long gone to another. Perhaps that's why we do this."

And Mary asked again, "Are you young -- or old?"

"I became old very quickly, when I was quite young. Then he came along. Now I'm older and younger than ever." They walked in silence again and then the Magdalene said, "Do you know the story of the holy man who, walking down the road, encountered a man who was terribly ugly? 'Peace be unto you,' the ugly one greeted him, as any courteous person would. But, instead of returning the greeting, the holy man could not help but blurt out, 'What ugliness! Is everyone where you come from as ugly as you?' The ugly one replied: 'Why don't you tell that to the Craftsman who made me? Why don't you say to Him, blessed be He, What an ugly vessel You have made!' Then the holy man bowed before him and begged his forgiveness.

"For so long I felt like that ugly man. I didn't realize his answer could be mine until I met our Nazarene."

And the Magdalene told Mary her story.

In Magdala her family had great wealth. "Have you noticed how seldom a wealthy person is stoned? Or even threatened?" She was the eldest. Her father of course

had wanted a son for his firstborn. Still, she became dear to him. As her brothers and sisters were born, she remained his favorite. He lavished things upon her. This was thought a weakness in him, and he admitted it, but he didn't change toward her. He even taught her to read. There was a lot of talk about that -- many think it sin-like for a female to read -- but they complained in grumbles; people don't complain directly or loudly to men of wealth. Did the devils find her because she stayed out too long after dark? She liked the dark. She wasn't afraid of it. "That was silly. There's much to be afraid of in darkness." Or were her devils a punishment of her father, for favoring and teaching a girl? Her mother thought so. Or were they punishment for her thoughts? But she couldn't help that, she was always thinking, always questioning. (This made Mary shudder. She, too, had always been silently thinking and questioning. Was her barrenness punishment for that?) Protected by the power of her father, the young Magdalene expressed her thoughts without fear -- "without thinking," she said, angry at her younger self. She was sixteen and lovely and still unmarried. There was gossip in the town, disapproval. The dowry her father wanted was large and grew larger, and the marriage negotiations always broke off with terrible arguments. Her father made enemies because of this. Her father grew darker. The way he looked at her and spoke to her was darker. Defying reason, the sums he asked became still larger -- she was his favorite, after all. People gossiped that he didn't want to part with her, that it was unnatural; but at the same time, he seemed no longer to want to be around her. He became more distracted, more angry -- and, for the first time, angry at her. "And I was bursting. You know how it is at that age. You feel like you're bursting." Her body was on fire, her eyes were on fire, her very hair seemed on fire -- black hair aflame. As a girl she'd been happy and light and arrogant and playful. Now she too was getting darker, darker by the day. "Dark fire," she told Mary. First it seemed her own body was devouring her, and now also her thoughts became devourers. She had enjoyed thinking and imagining, it had been her favorite thing, but not anymore; her thoughts and imaginings turned on her, from inside her. They didn't seem her own anymore. They were alien and terrible. *She* could not be thinking these things. So she felt something alien had entered her. And then began the dreams. Every night. Even now the Magdalene could not speak much about the dreams. Vaguely she said, "Creatures unheard of. Living rocks. Screaming angels. Cities made of fire."

“Cities on fire?”

“Cities *of* fire.”

She knew now that she was possessed of devils. But she wanted no one else to know it. “I tried to behave well. Oh how I tried to behave well.” Her arrogant ways ceased. She was so carefully proper. Why did they all shun her the more then? Even her family. A hush when she was about. No one wanted to be near her. “I started to believe they could see my dreams. That everyone could. For now it seemed that my dreams walked beside me, and that everyone knew.” She could not resist the urge sometimes to run suddenly headlong with all her might, to escape her dreams. She was a strong tall girl and could run very fast. “I must have been quite a sight. No one could meet my eyes.” Sometimes she shook herself all over and threw herself on the ground to drive her demons out, but this was useless. Of course no one wanted to marry her anymore. Her father, her strong father, seemed to be dying of shame -- ashamed of her, she assumed. Finally she really could see her dreams walking beside her. It was as though she was dreaming night and day. She began to waste away. One morning she woke and her family looked at her in horror. She did not understand why. Her little sisters and brothers ran from the house. They were wealthy, they had luxuries, they had copper mirrors. In the wavy surface of one such mirror she saw that her dark hair had changed color in her sleep. Had become as it was now: white, silver, gray, all mixed. Strangely, this new development seemed to settle things. There was no longer any question of her fate. She had sinned, somehow, or her family had, or her ancestors, and she'd been marked. Set apart. By God or His agent the Adversary, for what else could accomplish such a thing, change the color of hair in a night, black to white? There was some debate about whether she was now unclean, but the Law says nothing specific about the color of a woman's hair or how it may change. Because it could not be decided definitely that she was unclean (though many thought she was), she was not counted among the unclean. “My father's wealth had something to do with that too. Many depended upon him. He employed many in his interests.” But at least now she was left to her own devices. It was no longer unnatural that no one would have much to do with her, even her family and her father. The issue had been decided by her hair. “They relaxed. Relaxed! Somehow, a judgment had been passed.” From that time on, having nothing but her dreams, she

learned to befriend her dreams. “Creatures. Living rocks. Tortured angels. Trees of fire. Women with many breasts. Men with many mouths and knives for teeth. Flies that sang like birds.” It took some courage to befriend them but she had no choice. That was the land she lived in now, the land of her dreams, night and day. If she spoke aloud with them as she walked, who cared anymore? When others passed, they made the sign for protection against the evil eye -- and let it go at that. The issue had been decided. “I would go far far far -- in my dreams -- and come back back back. Oh the world is a much larger place than they tell us. And I did not any longer recognize a difference between night and day, except one could see better sometimes.”

In this way, some years passed. Her needs were provided for. Even luxuriously. No one at all spoke to her. She was given a room alone, she ate alone, they did not even let her do chores. “You know how it can be in a village -- everyone decides that some person doesn’t really exist, and then it’s as though that person is not there, though the person remains.” She was alone. Except for her dreams. “I learned from them, a great deal. Does that sound strange? One learns from what teaches, but one has little choice in who or what teaches, or what is taught.” If only devils would speak to her, then, out of loneliness, she would speak to them. “It was,” she smiled, “merely civil on my part.” Then: “Loneliness is enormous. It is the largest thing of all, next to God. I think you know this. The world is made of God and loneliness.”

As the Magdalene talked Mary’s spirit quieted, and she found to her surprise that she was no longer frightened by the Magdalene’s hair or by anything else, for the time being. And the question, How could a tale of such suffering ease my soul? -- that was just one more mystery in this new life where every day brought forth new mysteries, a life made of mysteries as her old life had been made of tasks.

The Magdalene, for her part, sensed how Mary accepted her without condition or judgment, with neither awe nor fear, and for this she felt an overwhelming gratitude. Had it been granted, at last, that even Mary of Magdala could have a friend?

The Magdalene had never told her story before, had never heard herself say it aloud. It cost her a great effort. It was a while before the Magdalene spoke again, and her

voice was pained.

“One day *he* came.” With Simon and Andrew, the sons of Zebedee, Philip, a few stragglers, “and several distracted women.” (The Magdalene laughed when she said that.) It was a Sabbath, the day the strangers came. She was careful to be still on the Sabbath. On the Sabbath one must do no work. It is forbidden even to gather wood for a cooking fire. One eats only food already prepared, only fruit already gathered. Even to take a walk is forbidden, except to the synagogue -- otherwise one is not supposed to go but a certain distance from one’s dwelling. “But I lived in nightmares. How could I measure the proper distance from a nightmare?” Wealth or no, a violator of the Sabbath might be stoned. In her pride she was sometimes tempted to do something that would invite, demand, stoning, and on the Sabbath she was especially tempted -- so that then she might stand in the stoning-pit and look straight into their eyes. They would be forced to look at her then, if only to aim well and kill her. And she would show them eyes they would never forget. Then they’d dream too. Of her. She would be their devil. Maybe for some she already was. She liked to think so. But she restrained her pride. To her surprise, even now she wanted to live. And on one Sabbath he came -- and saw her standing before her father’s house with her white-gray mane unbound. “Defiance is -- humility stripped naked. At least, mine was. Is! So, I think, is his. Our bond, yes.” His friends wanted him to avoid her, but he fixed his difficult eyes upon her and stepped toward her -- as though she’d called to him, though she had not, not that she knew.

As he approached her, the others called him back. “But he said -- looking at me, not them -- ‘This son of man came to seek and to save the lost.’”

And at the sound of his voice all her devils woke at once. Mangled angels, living rocks, men with many mouths and knives for teeth, women with many breasts, flies that sang like birds, all the awful bestiary that lived within her, they sprang up. She trembled horribly. He stood two paces from her, looking into her with such compassion. It was shocking, his compassion. “I knew that he *knew*, he knew what it was to be as I was. I felt he saw all the creatures of my nightmares and had compassion even on them. Could they too be creatures of God? Blessed be He, He made all things. So could they? They all leapt for him at once -- through my eyes. He wasn’t afraid. Oh, little Mary -- his gaze! Later I was told he said something -- a command of some sort -- but I heard nothing. I

was somewhere far behind my eyes, fixing myself on his eyes, as though he was far far away and I had to strain to see him. Wherever I was, some great distance behind my eyes, I struggled to crawl closer to his.”

Later they told her she’d flopped about like a fish on a damp deck. “All I recall is that there was no longer such a thing as air.” Devil after devil departed from her. It was terrible to feel them go -- for they had been her whole world. As she felt herself emptied of devils, or whatever they were, she feared what would take their place. “*Something* had to fill that space.” She felt it filled by his willingness to look deep into her eyes -- filled by a power that passed from his eyes into her. This was, after all, all she’d ever wanted, though she had not known it: eyes to meet her own. But how could his mere presence, so it seemed, undo what had been? She felt a light she could not see, and it was everywhere, it lit the light that she could see, and it shimmered out of him and into her with the force of wind.

“They said I writhed. I don’t remember it. They said I screamed. I don’t remember it. They said seven devils came out of me. I was surprised. Only seven?”

It was difficult for her to rise after all that writhing. The tremblings in her muscles would not stop for days. She felt naked in spirit, but not ashamed. She felt whole yet incomplete. She felt new.

“His women gathered around me, and with twine from their bags and a cloth from somewhere they bound and covered my hair. I permitted it, but it made me a little afraid for them. Were they doing work on the Sabbath? There was grumbling among his men, who seemed to think it might be so, but he was unconcerned. He had gone a few paces off and knelt down, I think to pray. When they realized that, the men stopped bellyaching.”

And of course she walked with him, with them. First to the synagogue of Magdala. Where the village was amazed to see her among his own. To see her reasonable. To see her luminous. She did not know, in the synagogue, how her father looked at her, because she felt no need to look at him. Seeing this new change in her, the village was afraid -- for hadn’t she changed more than anyone there, in all their lifetimes?

Hadn't she changed thrice now, first with her madness and then with her hair and now this day? If one could change, all could change. This unadmitted knowledge fueled their fear.

“We are a wealthy town, we have all the scrolls, my father's donations bought many of them, and, as is the custom everywhere, any man who wishes can read -- though of course not many are able to read at all; any man may open a scroll and read his portion. Jesus went to the scrolls, selected one, opened it, and read: ‘The stranger who dwells amongst you shall be to you as one of your own; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord thy God.’ He was telling them through these words of the Law that they'd sinned against God and against me -- as though he knew the entire story. They weren't about to admit it, but they weren't about to protest. Not to his face. No one could meet and hold his eyes. No one but *me*.”

Mary was no longer shocked at the Magdalene's pride. She thought it belonged to the Magdalene by right. Mary only wondered if she ever would be as proud of anything, even for a moment.

When Jesus left Magdala, she who all her life had been called simply “Mary” left with him. “Every step thereafter has brought me closer -- to what? I don't have the words. Something fearful and marvelous. As he is fearful and marvelous. Very soon the others no longer called me Mary. I became The Magdalene. Strange, that I answer now to the name of the town that rejected me.”

So she joined their infernal, continual walking. The first day she walked with them there was a dead dog by the side of the road. Flies buzzed all about it. Maggots crawled in its eyes. Carrion birds were delighting in it.

Simon said, “By Heaven, that dog stinks.”

Jesus said, “But see its teeth -- its teeth are wonderfully white!”