

SEVENTEEN

Bread

Give us each day our daily bread.

—Luke 11:3

AFTER THE RAIN, THE FARMER TILLED THE SOIL. ONE hand gripped the goad and the other steadied the plow as his oxen lumbered beneath the sun, furrowing the landscape with muddy ripples, brown as the wrinkles around his eyes. In autumn, hope tasted like sweat and smelled of ox and earth and manure. An experienced farmer kept his eyes on the heaving shoulders of the beasts ahead and used his weight to nudge the plowshare down a steady path. *No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back*, the Teacher said, *is fit for service in the kingdom of God.*

After the tilling, the sower scattered seeds. Some seeds fell on rocky soil to be scorched by the sun, others fell on thorny soil to be choked out by the weeds, and still others were carried off by the wind to be eaten up by birds. But most sunk into the good soil where, in a tomb of darkness, they swelled and split open before breaking through the surface with a garish flash of green. *This is what the kingdom of God is like*, the Teacher said. *The seed sprouts and grows when the sower isn't watching.*

After the stalks grew tall and the heads heavy with grain, there was singing and dancing and harvest. Bodies bent like scythes inched through the fields, gathering the wheat into sheaves. The threshing floor echoed with the rhythmic pounding of flails as women with arms as strong as olive tree trunks loosened the grain from the chaff. At dusk, the children gathered to watch the winnowing forks pitch the last bit of chaff into the wind and send the rest of the bounty back to the earth like rain. *The harvest is plentiful*, the Teacher said, *but the workers are few.*

After the reaping, the hand mills hummed. This, too, was women's work—grinding grain into flour. Mother and daughter sat at the mill, spinning the handstone over the quern. It took all morning, but by noon a layer of white powder tickled their noses and speckled their hair. The mother teased the daughter about growing old in a day. *The kingdom of heaven is like yeast*, the Teacher said, *that a woman took and mixed into sixty pounds of flour until it*

worked all through the dough.

Sixty pounds of flour! Imagine that.

After mixing the flour with water, the baker kneaded the dough. Her hands, calloused from the millstone grip and spotted from the sun, moved with quick precision as she folded and pressed and turned, folded and pressed and turned, folded and pressed and turned. Her surface was a simple wooden trough, her kitchen a modest courtyard, lit by the embers of a dying fire. Most of the time she added yeast and then waited for the dough to rise, but not on the days when her people remembered how liberation once caught them by surprise. On those days she sent it straight to the baking pan and watched until the top browned. The scent made her stomach rumble. *I am the bread of life*, the Teacher said. *Whoever comes to me will never go hungry.*

What did he mean?

After the sun set, the servant brought up the bread. In one hand he balanced the loaves and the olive oil, in the other he carried a lamp to light his way up the stone stairs. His footsteps echoed too loudly, he thought, slowing down his pace. The mysterious company, once raucous with stories and songs, had quieted to sibilant whispers. Something about a betrayal. Something about a death. He kept his eyes on the floor as he approached the crowded table. But the Teacher thanked him before he took the bread and, like thousands of men in Jerusalem that night, lifted his eyes and said, *Blessed are thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.*

The HaMotzi—the blessing of the bread and its journey from earth to table. The Greeks called this kind of thanksgiving *eucharisteo*.

After he blessed the bread, the Teacher broke it and said, *This is my body, given for you. Take it. Eat it. Don't ever forget.*

After he blessed the wine, the Teacher poured it and said, *This is my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Take it. Drink it. Don't ever forget.*

After he left, the Teacher was arrested. After he was arrested, the Teacher was crucified. And after he was crucified, the Teacher was seen alive. They knew him by how he broke the bread.

After the Upper Room meal, the dog smelled the crumbs. His nose flared and his mouth watered as he scrambled up the stairs, paws scratching against the stone in frenzied patter. Soon he'd be chased out with a shout and a broom, but for a dog as skinny as he, even a few morsels would do. With animal abandon, he lapped up the spoils from under the table—some bread crumbs, a date, a scrap of fish, a few olives, and a taste of honey—before his ears perked to the far-off sound of another HaMotzi.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven, the Teacher said. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.