

Hide & Seek

by Donal Thompson

1

'No,' said Yeshu, 'drink some wine first.'

Eleazar dropped the chicken breast onto his plate and reached for a white jar.

He sniffed the contents.

'Wouldn't call this muck wine!' he said.

'Here. Let me.' Said Yeshu, 'Hold out your cup'

Yeshu poured a very generous quantity of wine for his old friend and a little less for himself.

'Your health!' said Yeshu.

'That your idea of a joke?' asked Eleazar taking a deep gulp,

'Bloody hell!'

He sniffed the cup and looked up with a big grin.

'Least I could do,' said Yeshu seriously.

I

The sun was warming up and Flavio was happy to be coming off night-duty and on his way to the barracks behind the Temple. He loosened the leather straps of his breast plate and sheathing his short sword, wiped sweat off his hands onto the cloak of a passing Jew. He hated the dust and stench of Jerusalem and missed the cool fountains and smooth pavements of Rome.

His six soldiers walked in front of him. Old men, busy women and skinny children all moved out of their way instinctively. More threatening than six soldiers marching, were six soldiers walking. A marching unit is a disciplined force. Ruthless but predictable. Walking soldiers were a gang.

Flavio noticed a man standing by the Temple gate. Although there must have been three hundred people there, the man had a space around him. People nudged each other and looked over at him. A little girl went running past him. Her mother quickly caught her up in her arms as if the man were infectious.

'Woman!'shouted Flavio, 'Here!'

The young woman scurried up to him, planted her daughter on the ground and stood nervously before him.

'Who is that man?'

'Don't know, sir'

'Who is he?'Flavio hissed.

The woman's daughter clasped her mother's robes.

'It's the dead man,' she murmured.

'Who?'

'Eleazar of Bethany.'

'Go!'

The soldiers had stopped to wait for him but Flavio waved them on. He took out his short sword and approached the man.

'You!' said the Sergeant,

Eleazar turned round and felt the point of the sword pressing into his cheek.

'Are you that Eleazar of Bethany?'

'I am,' said Eleazar, avoiding his eye.

'You don't look dead to me!'

'I'm not dead,' said Eleazar

'That can be changed, you know,' the sergeant menaced, pressing the tip of his sword slightly more into Eleazar' cheek.

Eleazar lifted his face away from the sword, took one small step back and looked at Flavio.

'I know that,' he said.

2

'That was good rich food,' said Eleazar, wiping his plate with a piece of bread, 'And fierce wine!'

'I'm glad you're back,' said Yeshu.

Eleazar was suddenly quiet. He looked up to the window where a sack cloth was filtering the afternoon sun. His skin shone from the oils that his sisters has massaged into his stiff body. He shifted on his stool and faced Yeshu.

'So,' he said gruffly, 'Let's call things by their name. I died , didn't I?'

'Yes, you did,' replied Yeshu, 'What do you remember?'

'I remember...I was in my bed...and there was a terrible pain...right here, just there under my ribs..and I couldn't breathe. Martha and Mary and old Menachim were there. Crying. And...then...I remember walking on a hill. But a hill with such green grass, Oh Yeshu. It was like a bed of grass. Across the valley there were birds singing and although they were far, far away you could hear every note. You could almost see the reds of their throats , the air was so clear.'

'Did you see anyone?' asked Yeshu.

'No,' answered Eleazar, 'There was nobody there.But...'

'Yes?'

'...it was if the place was waiting for someone. It was like a table just before the guests arrive.'

He played with some crumbs on the plate, a smile slowly grew.

'And then...I hear you. Eleazar! Come out! And next thing there's Mary and Martha ripping bandages off me , laughing and crying at the same time and me fit to eat a donkey and stiff as a door. Not that I wasn't pleased to see you.'

'It wasn't your time, Eleazar.' said Yeshu, 'I think it was a message for me. '

Yeshu moved his stool to the open doorway and sat down. He shielded his eyes and watched a stork fly across the sky. He kicked off his sandals.

'Or maybe he was telling you something, of course' he added.

II

Procura Tannicus was the governor's wife. She disliked sychophants and political manipulation but was not above the latter when it came to influencing her husband Pontius. She read extensively, composed music and odes and many a Roman hostess was glad she was living in Jerusalem.

She adjusted her silken stola as Eleazar was shown into her chambers.

'How kind of you to come, Eleazar of Bethany!' she smiled, 'Do sit down and have some breakfast won't you?'

'It wasn't kindness exactly, your excellency. Roman swords convince. And there's plenty of them out on the streets today.' said Eleazar as he remained standing.

'Yes. It's Ciaphas. Everyone is worked up. He seems keen to get rid of a troublesome young Rabbi'

'Yeshu, son of Josef.'

'Yes. A friend of yours I'm told.'

'My best friend, your excellency. He shouldn't be down in your dungeons.'

'I quite agree,' said Procura, 'It should be you. But Ciaphas has the intelligence of half a camel. The back half at that.'

'Me?'

'Well, yes, silly!' she smiled, 'I know all about the prophesies. I know that the Jews are waiting for a Deliverer..what is it they call him? ...the 'Meshiha'...the anointed one. 'Christus' as a civilised person might say. That's who scares the life out of fat old Ciaphas.'

'But I am not the Meshiha. I'm just a builder.'

'They tell me you died.'

'Just a simple man'

'It's easy to die, according to the poet Virgil. But to come back and "enjoy the day. That is a labour."' Said Procura, 'A miracle, even.'

'What do you want?'

'Look. Ciaphas is barking up the wrong tree...'

'But...'

'Eleazar!' she cried, 'There has only been one resurrection that I know about and that has been yours. And they did, did they not, anoint you before you were placed in the tomb. And even after when you came out again, from what I've heard. That's a fairly convincing case, wouldn't you say? Now, you are clearly the King that the Jews have been waiting for so... go and claim your kingdom. The

prophecies said someone would prepare your coming and it looks as if your pal Yeshu was doing just that when Camel's Arse Ciaphas' got edgy. But when Yeshu is freed they'll start looking for you so ...go and organise! Start a rebellion or something!'

'You'll free Yeshu?'

'I will do all I can. If...' she said, ' you admit to me now. You are the Meshiha. After all, if you are, that Yeshu can't be!'

Eleazar lowered his head and swallowed . Then he looked right into Procura's eyes.

'I am'

'Go and agitate then Eleazar Christus! Then you may get your kingdom and I may finally get to go home!'

3

'You know, when I heard you were recruiting followers, I was little annoyed.'

'Why?' asked Yeshu, lazily tossing a stone across the yard.

'I made you a promise'

'I know. That was the last time I saw you.'

'Till today'

'Till today'

'You were off to a wedding up in Cana with your Mum. You said...you said we wouldn't see each other again'

'And you said that you would...'

'...always, always be your brother and ... if you needed me and had no-one else to turn to....'

'And I asked if you meant it'

'And I nearly thumped you for asking' smiled Eleazar, 'and then...you said...in that case...we may very well see each other again,'

'Which we did'

'Which we did. Today'

'Today'

'Then you did that disappearing thing of your where you run off so quickly it looks as if you've vanished...least, that's what I thought at the time.'

'That was all I could do then,' said Yeshu, 'the rest of it started at the wedding.'

Eleazar poured Yeshu and himself a little more wine. His hand was steadier after the meal.

'Why didn't you send word?' asked Eleazar, 'You know I'd have come.'

Yeshu shrugged.

'Do you remember when we used to play hide and seek and do some really crazy things?' he said suddenly, ' You'd even hide under the chippings in my Dad's workshop or on a neighbour's roof. Remember old Judith. She went spare when she saw you hanging above her daughter's window. And then there was that cave in that valley behind Eliod's's farm? It was hidden by a fallen tree. One day I really lost you. We never used to play that far away from the centre of the village. I couldn't find you anywhere. Eleazar, I remember it. My God, I remember it. That hungry mouth, that darkness! That nothingness. Like a trap. Like the entry to Hell. I was so sure you had gone in there. It was so Eleazar. Hiding like a secret at the end of the world. But I couldn't go in and find you. Eleazar, I was scared. I was frightened of the dark. Do you remember? I shouted "Eleazar! Come out!" And you came out smiling. And then you showed me there was nothing to be frightened of. It was just a cave.'

Tears fell down Yeshu's cheeks and ran into his light beard. 'When you died, here in Bethany five days ago' said Yeshu, 'It was that cave again. Only this time you come out and I go in. It's my turn. My job. I have to show that it's nothing to be scared off. Even as kids, especially as kids, I admired your courage Eleazar.' 'You're the miracle worker, not me!' replied his friend

'I know. Exactly. That's why you're braver. Your death was showing me the way in. But you had to come back.'

'Why did that happen?'

' Because it's me who has to find the way through.'

Yeshu sobbed. Eleazar moved to him and put his arms around him. Yeshu breathed in deeply and tried to stop his tears. The shadows slowly lengthened in Bethany.

'I'm so scared,' he said

III

Flavio marched by the old city wall from Golgotha. There were soldiers everywhere and the stench of hysteria hung in the air. He had fought in many campaigns and in Germany especially he had seen some atrocious spectacles. But this? He made a mental note to track down the released murderer Barrabas.

Suddenly there was a scream and a gap opened up in the crowd. A man holding a bloodied dagger tried to sprint past between the Guard and the wall. Flavio demolished him.

'What this?' he said, wrenching the dagger from the man's grasp 'One of the Ciaphas' men?'

In an instant the six soldiers of the Guard surrounded the man and had their javelins pressed into his neck. Flavio looked around from where the man had come. A knot of people had formed around a prostrate figure.

'Back!' he barked.

On the floor, breathing heavily lay Eleazar. His hands were covering a wound in his side. A slow redness blossomed on his tunic.

'I know you, ' said Flavio, 'You're the dead man from Bethany.'

'I'm not dead,' grimaced Eleazar.

'That can change,' replied Flavio, not unkindly. He knelt beside him and called to the soldiers.

'You two men!' he pointed, 'Take that sack of shit to the barracks. The barracks, you hear? Not the Palace or the Temple. My orders! On the double! '

The soldiers dragged the man up, making sure to bang his head against the wall for good measure.

'The rest of you!' he shouted, 'Make a stretcher and get over here!'

Three soldiers upturned a tressle table spilling the contents to the ground and ran over to Flavio. Eleazar was lifted onto the table expertly but the movement made him cry out.

'What's the point of being resurrected, Dead Man,' asked Flavio, 'if you're going to let Ciaphas stiff you at the first opportunity?'

'Ciaphas?'

'That pisspot was one of Ciaphas' lackeys,' said Flavio, 'They'd stab their granny's eyes out if they thought he'd approve. I hope you don't mind a bit of Roman hospitality.'

4

Eleazar lit a lamp and olive oil scented the evening air. He walked over and sat just outside the door on the ground to the right of Yeshu.

'Something you said before, Yeshu,' he said, 'I don't understand.' Yeshu looked at him with reddened eyes.

'You're not the first and you won't be the last,' he said.

'That's right,' smiled Eleazar slyly, 'The first shall be the last or something like that, isn't it?'

'I should have left you in there!'

'You said that your Father..God...was telling you something with my..death...my whatever'

'Maybe. Yes. I think so'

'And you also said that maybe he was telling me something.'

'Yes'

'You think he was reminding you of what you have to do. But what do you think he was telling me?'

'That's between you and Him,' said Jesus, 'I'm sure that it will become apparent. You've been brought to life, Eleazar. Like a donkey brought to water. The drinking is your business.'

'That why you did the water to wine trick? A hint like. A symbol? Like those stories you're famous for'

Yeshu burst out laughing. Yeshu bellowed. The tears ran down his cheeks and he doubled up on his stool.

'You should be a Rabbi, Eleazar!' he gasped

'Why that, then?'

'I changed that water to wine..'

Yeshu's body rocked with laughter.

'...because the wine they served gave my mother heartburn!'

Eleazar stared at Yeshu who was clasping his ribs with laughter.

Eleazar started to laugh and his recently resurrected body ached and that just made him laugh all the more. Eleazar, son of Eli, and Yeshu, son of God threw their arms around one another and cried with laughter. The neighbours thought they must be drunk.

IV

Eleazar sat up in bed. His entire midriff was bandaged tightly and he had a dull pain in his ribs.

'You're looking good for a dead man, Dead Man,' said Flavio. He was out of uniform sitting at a table across the room from Eleazar's bed.

'Thank you,' said Eleazar.

Flavio rose and pulled a heavy chair to the bedside. He sat down and looked at the patient, thinking.

'I've seen generals in battle. Hard men used to making decisions in difficult situations. They have always, always been sure of their decisions. Always. I have never seen doubt on the face of a Roman general,' he said, 'but when you looked at me and said "I know"...that was a certainty I'd never encountered. You have crossed the Acheron twice.'

'They say Yeshu's body has disappeared?'

'Yes,' said Flavio, 'Without a trace. There's talk of him being a god. That'll cause trouble'

'Yes,' said Eleazar 'it will'

