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Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt

Anne Rice

1

I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD. What do you know when you're seven years old? All my life, or so I thought, we'd been in the city of Alexandria, in the Street of the Carpenters, with the other Galileans, and sooner or later we were going home.

Late afternoon. We were playing, my gang against his, and when he ran at me again, bully that he was, bigger than me, and catching me off balance, I felt the power go out of me as I shouted: "You'll never get where you're going."

He fell down white in the sandy earth, and they all crowded around him. The sun was hot and my chest was heaving as I looked at him. He was so limp.

In the snap of two fingers everyone drew back. It seemed the whole street went quiet except for the carpenters' hammers. I'd never heard such a quiet.

"He's dead!" Little Joses said. And then they all took it up. "He's dead, he's dead, he's dead."

I knew it was true. He was a bundle of arms and legs in the beaten dust.

And I was empty. The power had taken everything with it, all gone.

His mother came out of the house, and her scream went up the walls into a howl. From everywhere the women came running.

My mother lifted me off my feet. She carried me down the street and through the courtyard and into the dark of our house. All my cousins crowded in with us, and James, my big brother, pulled the curtain shut. He turned his back on the light. He said:

"Jesus did it. He killed him." He was afraid.

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"Don't you say such a thing!" said my mother. She clutched me so close to her, I could scarcely breathe.

Big Joseph woke up.

Now Big Joseph was my father, because he was married to my mother, but I'd never called him Father. I'd been taught to call him Joseph. I didn't know why.

He'd been asleep on the mat. We'd worked all day on a job in Philo's house, and he and the rest of the men had lain down in the heat of the afternoon to sleep. He climbed to his feet.

"What's that shouting outside?" he asked. "What's happened?"

He looked to James. James was his eldest son. James was the son of a wife who had died before Joseph married my mother.

James said it again.

"Jesus killed Eleazer. Jesus cursed him and he fell down dead."

Joseph stared at me, his face still blank from sleep. There was more and more shouting in the street. He rose to his feet, and ran his hands back through his thick curly hair.

My little cousins were slipping through the door one by one and crowding around us.

My mother was trembling. "He couldn't have done it," she said. "He wouldn't do such a thing."

"I saw it," said James. "I saw it when he made the sparrows out of clay on the Sabbath. The teacher told him he shouldn't do such things on the Sabbath. Jesus looked at the birds and they turned into real birds. They flew away. You saw it too. He killed Eleazer, Mother, I saw it."

My cousins made a ring of white faces in the shadows: Little Joses, Judas, and Little Symeon and Salome, watching anxiously, afraid of being sent out. Salome was my age, and my dearest and closest. Salome was like my sister.

Then in came my mother's brother Cleopas, always the talker, who was the father of these cousins, except for Big Silas who came in now, a boy older than James. He went into the corner, and then came his brother, Levi, and both wanted to see what was going on.

"Joseph, they're all out there," said Cleopas, "Jonathan bar Zakkai, and his brothers, they're saying Jesus killed their boy. They're envious that we got that job at Philo's house, they're envious that we got the other job before that, they're envious that we're getting more and more jobs, they're so sure they do things better than we do-."

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"Is the boy dead?" Joseph said. "Or is the boy alive?"

Salome shot forward and whispered in my ear. "Just make him come alive, Jesus, the way you made the birds come alive!"

Little Symeon was giggling. He was too little to know what was going on. Little Judas knew, but he was quiet.

"Stop," said James, the little boss of the children. "Salome, be quiet."

I could hear them shouting in the street. I heard other noises. Stones were hitting the walls of the house. My mother started to cry.

"You dare do that!" shouted my uncle Cleopas and he rushed back out through the door. Joseph went after him.

I wriggled out of my mother's grasp and darted out before she could catch me, and past my uncle and Joseph and right into the crowd as they were all waving and hollering and shaking their fists. I went so fast, they didn't even see me. I was like a fish in the river. I moved in and out through people who were shouting over my head until I got to Eleazer's house.

The women all had their backs to the door, and they didn't see me as I went around the edge of the room.

I went right into the dark room, where they'd laid him on the mat. His mother was there leaning on her sister and sobbing.

There was only one lamp, very weak.

Eleazer was pale with his arms at his sides, same soiled tunic, and the soles of his feet very black. He was dead. His mouth was open and his white teeth showed over his lip.

The Greek physician came in-he was really a Jew-and he knelt down, and he looked at Eleazer and he shook his head.

Then he saw me and said:

"Out."

His mother turned and she saw it was me and she screamed.

I bent over him:

"Wake up, Eleazer," I said. "Wake up now."

I reached out and laid my hand on his forehead.

The power went out. My eyes closed. I was dizzy. But I heard him draw in his breath.

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His mother screamed over and over and it hurt my ears. Her sister screamed. All the women were screaming.

I fell back on the floor. I was weak. The Greek physician was staring down at me. I was sick. The room was dim. Other people had rushed in.

Eleazer came up, and he was up all knees and fists before anyone could get to him, and he set on me and punched me and hit me, and knocked my head back against the ground, and kicked me again and again:

"Son of David, Son of David!" he shouted, mocking me, "Son of David, Son of David!" kicking me in the face, and in the ribs, until his father grabbed him around the waist and picked him up in the air.

I ached all over, couldn't breathe.

"Son of David!" Eleazer kept shouting.

Someone lifted me and carried me out of the house and into the crowd in the street. I was still gasping. I hurt all over. It seemed the whole street was screaming, worse than before, and someone said the Teacher was coming, and my uncle Cleopas was yelling in Greek at Jonathan, Eleazer's father, and Jonathan was yelling back, and Eleazer was shouting, "Son of David, Son of David!"

I was in Joseph's arms. He was trying to move, but the crowd wouldn't let him. Cleopas was pushing at Eleazer's father. Eleazer's father was trying to get at Cleopas, but other men took hold of his arms. I heard Eleazer shouting far away.

There was the Teacher declaring: "That child's not dead, you hush up, Eleazer, who said he was dead? Eleazer, stop shouting! Whoever could think this child is dead?"

"Brought him back to life, that's what he did," said one of theirs.

We were in our courtyard, the entire crowd had pushed in with us, my uncle and Eleazer's people still screaming at each other, and the Teacher demanding order.

Now my uncles, Alphaeus and Simon, had come. These were Joseph's brothers. And they'd just woken up. They put up their hands against the crowd. Their mouths were hard and their eyes were big.

My aunts, Salome and Esther and Mary, were there, with all the cousins running and jumping as if this were a festival, except for Silas and Levi and James who stood with the men.

Then I couldn't see anymore.

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I was in my mother's arms, and she had taken me into the front room. It was dark. Aunt Esther and Aunt Salome came in with her. I could hear stones hitting the house again. The Teacher raised his voice in Greek.

"There's blood on your face!" my mother whispered. "Your eye, there's blood. Your face is cut!" She was crying. "Oh, look what's happened to you," she said. She spoke in Aramaic, our tongue which we didn't speak very much.

"I'm not hurt," I said. I meant to say it didn't matter. Again my cousins pressed close, Salome smiling as if to say she knew I could bring him back to life, and I took her hand and squeezed it.

But there was James with his hard look.

The Teacher came into the room backwards with his hands up. Someone ripped the curtain away and the light was very bright. Joseph and his brothers came in. And so did Cleopas. All of us had to move to make room.

"You're talking about Joseph and Cleopas and Alphaeus, what do you mean drive them out!" said the Teacher to the whole crowd. "They've been with us for seven years!"

The angry family of Eleazer came almost into the room. The father himself did come into the room.

"Yes, seven years and why don't they go back to Galilee, all of them!" Eleazer's father shouted. "Seven years is too long! That boy is possessed of a demon and I tell you my son was dead!"

"Are you complaining that he's alive now! What's the matter with you!" demanded my uncle Cleopas.

"You sound like a madman!" added my uncle Alphaeus.

And thus and so it went, with them shouting back and forth, and making fists at each other, and the women nodding and throwing glances to one another, and far off others joining in.

"Oh, that you say such things!" said the Teacher, saying every word as if we were in the House of Study. "Jesus and James are my finest pupils. And these men are your neighbors, what's happened to make you turn against them like this! Listen to your own words!"

"Oh, your pupils, your pupils!" cried Eleazer's father. "But we have to live and work, and there's more to life than being a pupil!" More of them came into the room.

My mother backed up against the wall, holding me close. I wanted to get away, but I couldn't. She was too afraid.

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"Yes, work, that's it," my uncle Cleopas said, "and who's to say we can't live here, what do you mean drive us out, just because more of the work goes to us, because we're better and better at giving people what they want-."

Suddenly Joseph put up his hands and he roared out the word: "Quiet!"

And they all went quiet.

The whole mob of them fell quiet.

Never had Joseph raised his voice before.

"The Lord made shame for an argument such as this!" Joseph said. "You break the walls of my house."

No one said anything. Everyone looked at him. Even Eleazer was there and he looked up at him.

Not even the Teacher spoke.

"Now Eleazer is alive," Joseph said. "And as it happens, we are going home to Galilee."

Again no one spoke.

"We will leave for the Holy Land as soon as our few jobs are finished here. We'll bid you farewell, and those jobs that come to us as we prepare to go we'll send to you by your leave."

Eleazer's father stretched his neck, then nodded and opened his hands. He shrugged. He bowed his head, and then he turned. His men turned. Eleazer stared at me, and then all of them went out of the room.

The crowd left the courtyard, and my aunt Mary, the Egyptian, who was Cleopas' wife, came in and closed the curtain partway.

What was left now was all our people, and the Teacher. The Teacher was not happy. He looked at Joseph. He frowned.

My mother wiped her eyes, and looked to my face, but then the Teacher began to talk. She held me close, her hands shaking violently.

"Leaving to go home?" said the Teacher. "And taking my fine students with you? Taking my fine Jesus? And what will you go home to, may I ask? To the land of milk and honey?"

"You mock our forefathers?" asked my uncle Cleopas.

"Or you mock the Lord Himself?" asked my uncle Alphaeus, whose Greek was as good as the Teacher's Greek.

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"I don't mock anyone," said the Teacher, looking at me as he spoke, "but I marvel you can leave Egypt behind so easily over a little hubbub in the street."

"That has nothing to do with it," said Joseph.

"Then why go? Jesus is coming along wonderfully here. Why, Philo is so impressed with his learning and James here is a marvel, and . . ."

"Yes, and this isn't Israel, is it?" asked Cleopas. "And it isn't our home."

"No, and it's Greek that you're teaching them, Scripture in Greek!" said Alphaeus. "And we teach them here at home in Hebrew because you don't even know Hebrew and you are the Teacher, and this is what the House of Study is here, Greek, and you call it the Torah, and Philo, yes, the great Philo, he gives us work to do, and so do his friends, and all this is very fine, and we've done well, and we're grateful, yes, but he too speaks Greek and reads the Scriptures in Greek, and marvels at what these boys know in Greek-."

"All the world speaks Greek now," said the Teacher. "The Jews in every city of the Empire speak Greek and read the Scripture in Greek-."

"Jerusalem does not speak Greek!" said Alphaeus.

"In Galilee we read the Scripture in Hebrew," said Cleopas. "Do you even understand Hebrew, and you call yourself a Teacher!"

"Oh, I'm weary of your attacks, why do I put up with you, where are you taking yourselves and these boys, back to some dirt village! You leave Alexandria for that."

"Yes," said Uncle Cleopas, "and it's no dirt village, it's my father's house. Do you know one word of Hebrew?" He then sang out in Hebrew the psalm that he loved and had long taught to us. "The Lord shall preserve my going out and my coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore." Following it with "Now do you know what that means?"

"Do you yourself know what that means!" shot back the Teacher. "I'd like to hear you explain it. You know what the scribe in your synagogue taught you what it means, that's all you know and if you learned enough Greek here to shout in my face, you're the better for it. What do any of you know, you hardheaded Galilean Jews? Coming to Egypt for refuge, and leaving as hardheaded as you came."

My mother was anxious.

The Teacher looked at me.

"And to take this child, this brilliant child-."

"And what would you have us do?" asked Alphaeus.

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"Oh, no, don't ask such a thing!" my mother whispered. It was so unusual for her to speak up.

Joseph glanced at her, and then looked at the Teacher. The Teacher went on.

"It's always the same," said the Teacher with a great drawn-out sigh. "In times of trouble, you come down to Egypt, yes, always to Egypt, she receives the dregs of Palestine. . . ."

"The dregs!" Cleopas said. "You call our forefathers the dregs?"

"They didn't speak Greek either," said Alphaeus.

Cleopas laughed. "And the Lord on Sinai didn't speak Greek," he said.

Uncle Simon said quietly, "And the High Priest now in Jerusalem, when he lays his hands on the goat, he probably forgets to tell all our sins in Greek."

They were all laughing. The older boys laughed. Aunt Mary laughed. But my mother was still crying. I had to stay by her side.

Even Joseph smiled.

The Teacher was angry. He went on:

". . . if there's a famine, come down to Egypt, if there's no work, come down to Egypt, if there's a murderous rampage on the part of Herod, come down to Egypt, as if King Herod took the slightest care as to the fate of a handful of Galilean Jews such as you! A murderous rampage! As if-."

"Stop," Joseph said.

The Teacher stopped.

All the men stared at the Teacher. No one said a word. No one moved.

What had happened? What had the Teacher said? Murderous rampage. What were these words?

Even James had the same look on his face as the men.

"Oh, you think people don't talk about these things?" asked the Teacher. "As if I believe travelers' tales."

They said nothing.

Then in a soft voice Joseph spoke.

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"The Lord made patience for this!" he said. "But I don't have it. We go home because it is our home," he went on, staring at the Teacher, "and it is the Lord's land. And because Herod is dead."

The Teacher was taken aback. Everyone else was surprised. Even my mother was surprised, and I could see the women looking at each other.

Now, we little ones all knew Herod was the King of the Holy Land, and we knew he was a bad man. Only lately had he done a terrible thing, a desecrating of the Temple, or so we'd heard as all the men talked about it but we didn't know much more than that.

The Teacher was frowning at Joseph.

"Joseph, it's not wise to say such a thing," the Teacher said. "You can't speak of the King in this way."

"He is dead," said Joseph. "The news will come by the Roman post in two days."

The Teacher was cold. All the others were quiet, eyes on Joseph.

"How do you know?" asked the Teacher.

No answer.

"It will take a little while to prepare for our journey," Joseph said. "Our boys will have to work with us until then. No more school for them now, I fear."

"And what will Philo think?" asked the Teacher, "when he hears that you're taking Jesus?"

"What has Philo to do with my son," said my mother. Her voice shocked everyone.

Another silence followed.

I knew this was not an easy moment.

A while back, the Teacher had taken me to Philo, a rich man and a scholar, to show me to him as a fine pupil, and Philo had taken a great liking to me, and even taken me to the Great Synagogue which was as large and beautiful as the pagan temples of the city, where the rich Jews gathered on the Sabbath, a place to which my family never went. We went to the little House of Prayer in our own street.

It was after those visits that Philo had given work to us from his house, to make wooden doors and benches and book stands for his new library, and soon his friends had given our family similar jobs which meant good wages as well.

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Philo had treated me as a guest when I was brought to him.

And even today when we had put in the doors on their pivots, and picked up the painted benches from the men who did the painting and taken them to Philo, I had seen him and he had taken time with us to tell Joseph kind things about me.

But to talk of this now, that Philo had taken a liking to me? It was not right, and I felt the men were uneasy as they looked at the Teacher. They had worked hard for Philo and for Philo's friends.

The Teacher did not answer my mother.

Finally Joseph said: "Philo should be surprised that my son goes home with me to Nazareth?"

"Nazareth?" said the Teacher coldly. "What is Nazareth? I've never heard of such a place. You came here from Bethlehem. Your terrible stories, why you-. Philo thinks Jesus is the most promising scholar he's ever seen. Philo would educate your son if you would allow. That's what Philo has to do with your son, that's what Philo's said. Philo would see to it-."

"Philo has nothing to do with our son," said my mother, again shocking all that she spoke up, her hands clasping my shoulders tightly.

No more the rich house with its marble floors. No more the library of parchment scrolls. Smell of ink. Greek is the language of the Empire. See this? This is a map of the Empire. Hold the edge for me there. Look. All this Rome rules. There is Rome, here is Alexandria, here is Jerusalem. See, there Antioch, Damascus, Corinth, Ephesus, all great cities, and in all these cities the Jews live and speak Greek and have Torah in Greek. But there is no city outside of Rome as great as Alexandria where we are now.

I shook off the memory. James was staring at me. The Teacher was talking to me.

". . . but you liked Philo, didn't you? You liked answering his questions. You liked his library."

"He stays with us," said Joseph calmly. "He will not go to Philo."

The Teacher continued to stare at me. This was not right.

"Jesus, speak up!" he said. "You want to be educated by Philo, don't you?"

"My lord, I do as my father and mother want," I said. I shrugged. What was I to do?

The Teacher turned and threw up his hands.

"When will you go?" he asked.

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"As soon as we can," said Joseph. "We have work to finish."

"I want to send word to Philo that Jesus is leaving," said the Teacher, and with that he turned to go. But Joseph stopped him.

"We've done well in Egypt," he said. He took money out of his purse. He pressed it into the hand of the Teacher. "I thank you for teaching our children."

"Yes, yes, and you take them back to-where was it? Joseph, there are more Jews living in Alexandria than there are in Jerusalem."

"There may be, Teacher," said Cleopas, "but the Lord dwells in the Temple in Jerusalem, and his land is the Holy Land."

All the men laughed to approve and the women too and so did I and Little Salome and Judas, Joses and Symeon.

The Teacher couldn't say anything to this, but only nodded.

"And if we finish our work quickly," Joseph said with a sigh, "we can reach Jerusalem in time for Passover."

We all gave cries of delight when we heard it. Jerusalem. Passover. We were all excited. Salome clapped her hands. Even Uncle Cleopas was smiling.

The Teacher bowed his head. He put two fingers to his lips. Then he gave us a blessing:

"May the Lord go with you on your journey. May you reach your home in peace."

The Teacher left.

At once all the family was speaking our native tongue for the first time in the whole afternoon.

My mother looked at me, ready to nurse my cuts and bruises. "Why, they're gone," she whispered. "You're healed."

"It wasn't much," I said. I was so happy we were going home.

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