



Tracy Groot

The Brother's Keeper

a novel

Praise for novels by Tracy Groot

“[*The Brother’s Keeper* is a] lyrical and affecting first novel.”

BOOKLIST, STARRED REVIEW

“Groot vividly portrays both the heroism and the horrors of World War II. With the July release of Christopher Nolan’s film *Dunkirk*, there is bound to be interest.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL ON THE MAGGIE BRIGHT

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BOOKLIST ON THE SENTINELS OF ANDERSONVILLE

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*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW OF THE
SENTINELS OF ANDERSONVILLE*

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ROMANTIC TIMES, TOP PICK REVIEW

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PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

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THE BANNER

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PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW OF MADMAN

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ASPIRING RETAIL MAGAZINE

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The Brother's Keeper

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Prologue

JAMES. Seek James.

The madness was upon him once again. It prodded when his steps lagged; it prickled when he stopped. It drove him as it had the first time, a time when Balthazar's companions knew its pursuit and had none but to heed as well. No glowing orb in the sky accompanied the madness this time. His eyes drifted to the place it had once hung.

Alone now. Riven from all familiar, thrust into mile after mile of barren strangeness. Alone, save the madness.

"I am too old for this," Balthazar muttered to the purpling heavens. He gained the top of the knoll and paused, as much for breath as to survey the patterns of the sky. He rubbed the back of his hand over a crusty mouth.

"I could do with some water, let alone a lamp in the sky."

It was easier then. *Follow the star*, the madness had told him. Where the simple injunction had lacked ceremony, he himself made up for it: The drivemasters wanted to know where their journey lay, so he threw grass to the wind. He listened to crickets. He turned in a circle three times while chanting

some nonsense, then consulted the charts and pointed imperiously: west. Much more credible than pointing to a lamp in the nighttime sky.

Now he had no star. No charts. All of his companions were gone, presumably. Gasparian for certain. Probably Melkor. Alazar had not returned with them from the first journey. And a fourth, Baran, had never arrived.

The old man sank to the earth and from his shoulder bag pulled out a waterskin. He loosed the fitting and rubbed a few drops of water over his ridged lips. Very different, this journey. Very different from that of long ago.



They had found Baran a day outside of Susa. He was nearly dead when a scout came back with the news that a traveler lay on the roadside, part of his leg eaten by wolves. Melkor was not for stopping; the poor wretch would be dead within the hour, he said. It was not the first time Melkor had been wrong.

Balthazar had cursed six different gods and their uncles when he saw Baran's wound and realized he had left the medicaments at home. The young man was well into the bone fever, past fetching back, by the time the entourage reached him. The scout had sharp eyes; only a scrap of wool alerted him to the man wedged in the rock and debris. How the poor, miserable creature had come to these straits, they never learned. He spoke few words before he died, and nothing of his circumstances. No explanation save "wolf," no travel gear or possessions save a box wrapped in cloth, protected by his

ravaged body. Extracting the wretch from the rocks was less painful to watch than his pathetic attempts to keep the box at his side.

“Balthazar, have you your herbs?” Gasparian asked in a low tone as Alazar and Melkor tended the man. “Alazar left his, and I would not give a shining beryl for what Melkor has in his bag.”

“Nor I,” Balthazar agreed, though he had to add, “Mine are home as well.”

If Gasparian’s raised brows had annoyed him, more so the bag he’d left behind. It was new, recently made for him by his mother, a length of cloth with several little pockets sewn in three rows. Ties were sewn at the ends; he could neatly roll his powders and herbs and secure the bundle with the ties. He had filled it with all he could gather and dry and grind and prepare in the little time he had to do it—and then forgotten it.

Forget a blanket; forget a packet of bread. To forget his medicaments vexed him to the roots of his teeth. Eight weeks out of Zabol, and still it vexed him. But the herbs left his mind as he grew aware of Melkor.

Melkor stood unwrapping the square bundle, taken from the dying man. Balthazar heard the whisper of a groan and watched the young man feebly reach toward his possession.

“What have we here?” Melkor mused as the cloth fell away. Balthazar blinked as the sinking sun caught the box in a silver gleam. Curious, the box, but he did not look long. His eyes went from the wasted form on the ground to Melkor, who did not seem to notice the feeble, reaching arm.

“Melkor . . .”

"This looks like lapis lazuli." He brought the box closer to his eyes. "It *is* lapis. Some of the finest I have seen."

"Melkor, give him back his box," Balthazar said.

Melkor regarded the man at his feet. "Maybe he stole it from somebody."

In two quick strides, Balthazar reached Melkor and snatched the box from his hands. He paused long enough to make sure Melkor saw his glare, then knelt and placed the box on the man's chest. He took the man's arm and circled it about the box, and saw gratefulness deep in the tortured eyes. He smiled back, then looked down to the leg, where Alazar was gingerly pulling away cloth. Alazar hissed softly and sat back on his heels.

It was likely the stench of rotting flesh as much as the sight of the grievous wound that set Alazar back. Balthazar winced at it, then met Alazar's eyes. Alazar sighed grimly and rose to consult with the others.

One of the drivemasters arrived with water and dribbled some into the man's grime-coated mouth. His face was waxen white, like a dirty candle. Balthazar brushed grit from the man's chin, then realized he was trying to speak. He leaned closely.

"Wolf," the man whispered.

Balthazar nodded and patted his shoulder. "Do not speak, my friend. Save it for getting better." This brought a stare from the drivemaster, which he ignored. "Perhaps you are far from home, as am I. A nasty business, traveling on these strange roads."

"Baran," he whispered.

"Your name is Baran?" He touched his fingertips to his forehead. "I am Balthazar, in the company of the strangest lot of

miscreants ever assembled under the heavens. I would tell you of our business, but you and I both would not believe me.”

“Balthazar,” Gasparian called behind him.

He gave Baran’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “I will be back.” The drivemaster trickled more water into his mouth.

Alazar, Melkor, Gasparian, and one of the drivers stood apart in consultation. Balthazar knew the outcome from five paces away. By Gasparian’s dark look and Alazar’s sad one, and by Melkor’s folded arms, he knew they meant to leave him.

Balthazar stopped short and lifted his chin. “His name is Baran,” he said, feet planted apart.

“An unfortunate wretch,” Melkor murmured. His eyes drifted to Baran’s wound.

“The wretch has a name,” Balthazar said evenly.

“We cannot stop,” Melkor replied.

Balthazar could feel his teeth clench. What was it about Melkor that set his molars to grinding? His teeth would be powder at the journey’s end. He looked at the others. Only Gasparian met his eyes.

“I think Melkor is right,” Gasparian said, doing little to conceal his reluctance for the decision. “We all feel the urgency to move on. You know of what I speak.”

“But the light in the sky—”

“It is more than that,” Melkor cut in.

“That is not what I mean!” Balthazar hissed. Yes, the urgency . . . the unseen prodding to move on . . . yes, it was there. They all felt it. “What I am *saying* is, do you suppose the one who put that light in the sky would mean for us to leave this man at the side of the road?” He shook his head. “I will not believe that.”

They all began to talk at once.

"Our commission," Alazar began pleadingly.

"We have a responsibility as emissaries of our people," Gasparian started.

"We cannot fail." Melkor pulled himself up.

Balthazar put himself under Melkor's nose and glared contempt into his cool, dark eyes. "We have failed already if we leave this man to die alone."

Why couldn't the universe have left him to his herbs? He was not made for this, this *madness*. He turned away from the others, unsure where to go, then simply began to walk and walk fast.

They would send Gasparian, he knew, because Gasparian was the only one he trusted.

And indeed, presently Gasparian puffed alongside him. "How about slowing down for an old man?"

"Not until I do not want to kill Melkor."

"Ah, you will keep this pace until Judea?"

Balthazar couldn't stop the smile. "Perhaps there and back again. All the way back to my village." The thought of his village brought a pang of homesickness, and his steps slowed.

He looked at the hills surrounding them, shaking his head. Every day he saw something new. Every day he hoped Reuel lived long enough to hear of the wonders beyond their village border. The mighty fire altars at Nakshi-Rustem; a giant-sized statue of Cyrus the Great.

"Do you wonder what we are doing out here, Gaspar? In my village, I was an herbalist and a second-rate priest. The gods strike me, I had no desire to guard the holy fire of Ahura

Mazdah." He looked sideways at Gasparian. "You did not hear that from me, understand?"

When Gasparian nodded, he continued.

"Our high priest was too old for the journey. It was heart-breaking. I never saw such longing. Reuel had the gift, as no one in our village has ever had before. He spoke often of a coming omen, a great portent from the west. No one really listened—until the star appeared and the council came to our village. Then suddenly, a humble old man no one gave a wormroot for is a hero. He was selected for the journey, but everyone knew he would never make it a week outside the village." Balthazar's steps stopped altogether. "Reuel thought he was doing me a favor."

Gasparian looked over his shoulder, down the road to the waiting entourage. "Balthazar . . .," he began gently.

"I do not know if I believe, Gaspar. Worse, I do not know if I care. What do you think about that?"

"I think we have to be going," the older man said. "Baran will die. Melkor thinks he will not last an hour. We can make him comfortable." Doubtfully, he added, "Melkor has a few powders with him that can ease the poor man's pain."

"I would not give his powders to a murdering zealot. Melkor may be a first-rate priest, but he is no herbalist."

"Come, young friend. You may not believe, but I do."

Balthazar cocked his head. "Enough to leave a man to die alone?"

Gasparian's gaze did not flinch. "Yes."

Balthazar looked away and said, "Now, that is passion. Reuel would be proud."

"Balthazar."

But he was not listening anymore. He looked down the road at the stopped entourage. The drivemasters were checking supplies, adjusting cinches, and inspecting ropes and stays. Alazar was kneeling next to Baran. Melkor was rummaging in one of his packs. Shortly they would be on the move again. Two months of this, from sunup to well into the night, with nothing but the star and the madness. Two months and many more ahead.

Ahriman take him; he was done with it.

He started for them, aware of his grinding molars, aware of the long journey back home. A solitary journey and unsafe—he might end up like Baran—but he would be free. Back to his herbs, back to everything normal, back to where things made sense. To a place where a man with a name would not die alone.

“I know that look,” Gasparian said, hurrying to his side.

“You have never seen this look.”

“I know it well. Do not make a hasty decision, my friend.”

He stopped short to scowl in Gasparian's face. “You do not seem to realize there has been a mistake. This was Reuel's mission, not my own.”

Gasparian returned the look thoughtfully, shaking his head. “There has been no mistake. You have been chosen for this. As was I. As was Alazar. *And* Melkor. We must press on.”

Balthazar felt the anger recede, replaced by something worse. He had thought Gasparian was different from the rest. *Ahriman take him*, he thought.

“I want no more of this,” Balthazar said hoarsely and turned away.

Melkor was tapping a fine, sage-colored powder into a cup.

He swirled the cup and watched the powder dissipate. He looked about for a twig and stirred the mixture thoroughly. Balthazar watched, keeping his disdain hidden.

“Coralwort?” he asked, almost pleasantly.

“Mancow,” Melkor replied, in a tone that said it shouldn’t be anything but. “Mancow, with bitters. A pinch of fiddleleaf.”

Balthazar nodded. Fiddleleaf. The idiot.

Melkor rose, but Balthazar placed a hand on his shoulder. “Do not trouble yourself further. I will give it to him.” He held out his hand.

Melkor looked at the hand, a trace of suspicion crossing his face, but he gave him the cup. He shook his cloak free of dust and said, “We ride shortly. Make haste.”

Balthazar gave a tight smile, which vanished when Melkor turned away.

Alazar was wiping Baran’s face with a damp cloth when Balthazar knelt beside him. He glanced at the cup in Balthazar’s hand.

“I will tend him now. Melkor says we ride. Perhaps you should make ready.”

Alazar nodded. He clapped his hand on Balthazar’s shoulder, then used it as leverage to rise. Balthazar watched him head for his mount. He glanced quickly at every member of the party, making sure each was occupied, then dumped the contents of the cup behind a rock.

“Mancow, with bitters,” he mocked under his breath. “A pinch of fiddleleaf.” Well and good—if one wanted to hasten the delivery of a woman’s first child. Not many days ago Melkor had given a paste of crushed limestone and olive oil to one of the drivers for a rash on his shins. Better to mix it

with the flour for bread. The man claimed it worked, but he feared Melkor. Probably feared he would get a nasty tonic if it did not work.

Balthazar settled himself on the ground next to Baran. The young man was muttering, weakly moving his head back and forth. Balthazar placed his hand on Baran's shoulder to let the man know he was not alone. From habit he began the death prayer, consecrating Baran's soul to the next life. From habit only. His belief in Ahura Mazda had dwindled long before this journey. He decided to direct the death prayer to the one who fired the star in the sky. Reuel believed in this god. Balthazar believed in Reuel.

A shadow fell across Baran. Melkor stood beside him and, after listening to Balthazar's soft murmur, took up the chant with him. It contented Balthazar deeply to know their prayers ascended to different gods. They intoned through the first set, the second, and the fourth, seamlessly omitting the third. The third set in the dirge was for kinsmen only. Balthazar would offer the third later, when the entourage had left, in the stead of the relatives this man would never see again.

The fourth set ended, and Melkor reached for the box on Baran's chest.

"Leave it," Balthazar growled between clenched and aching teeth.

"We may encounter someone who knows of him," Melkor protested, though he drew his hands back. "We cannot leave this to thieves."

"He is not dead yet. It is sacred to him."

"Not de—? How much of the cup did he drink?"

Slowly, Balthazar rose. He deliberately took two fistfuls of

Melkor's tunic and yanked him down, eye level to himself. "What else did you put in that cup?"

"Bristlebane."

Balthazar released him with a shove. Melkor staggered back, gained his balance, and smoothed his garments indignantly. Gasparian came to stand warily apart from them, looking from one to the other. Alazar appeared at his side.

"Brothers . . . ," Alazar began uncertainly.

"Bristlebane," Balthazar mused, nodding. It would have killed Baran in moments. Then Melkor would have taken the box from a dead man, not a dying one.

He nodded again and shifted his jaw, then looked away to the sky. He stared at it a moment before he realized his eyes sought the place where he had last seen the star. It was habit, for all of them. When stopping for meals in the broad of day, when gazing at strange rock formations and new landscapes, it was not long before a look flickered to the sky, to the place of the star.

One evening he had lost himself in the daze of the glittering nighttime sky, muttering an absent prayer of thanks to Tishtrya for the glory of the night; then he looked for the star and did not immediately see it. Disoriented, alarmed, then panicked, he leapt up and whirled about, searching, frantic, until he saw it again and allowed its soft glow to soothe him.

It was the first star to illumine the seeping twilight, the last to fade at dawn. He would try to guess where it would appear and learned the guess grew more accurate if he tried to sense the location first. Once on a visit to the brush, he made sure no one was looking, then closed his eyes and turned in a circle until insensible of direction. Eyes tightly shut, he drew

a slow breath, held it, quieted his heart, smoothed his mind, and spread his arms wide . . . then slowly raised an arm and pointed. He opened his eyes, gazed straight down the length of his arm and pointing finger, and there, balanced on his fingernail, was the cool white glow of Reuel's star of portent.

Follow the star. The injunction had become a part of him. It pulsed along with the beat of his heart, as if he had been born with its mystic force. He sought the star for solace, as his tiny nephew sought his thumb. He sought the star for reason, for times like this when the only thing on earth that made sense was not on earth at all.

He found the place where it would soon appear and knew he gazed at it dead-on.

"Brothers?" Alazar said again.

"I am staying with Baran," Balthazar said softly. "And then I am going home." He and the unseen star regarded each other while the others regarded themselves.

Melkor stalked past him without a word. Gasparian looked as if he would speak but held his counsel and turned away. Only Alazar tried to dissuade him, and that not for long. Balthazar shut out his words, and Alazar finally gave up.

He settled down next to Baran and watched the party prepare for departure. Though his eyes were mostly shut, Baran seemed to watch too. The drivemasters did not appear to notice the tension in the camp as they readied themselves to depart, though one of them looped an extra waterskin to the cante of his mount. Melkor threw Balthazar an occasional disgusted look, probably for the loss of the silver box. Alazar was clearly distressed, and Gasparian he could not figure out.

Balthazar slowly reclined against a rock, hands clasped

behind his head. “The sad fellow there, that is Alazar,” he told Baran cheerfully. “He is decent enough; I think you would like him. I will miss beating him at knucklebones. I will not miss his snoring. The one over there in the orange-and-purple-striped robe, the one who fancies your box, that would be Melkor. First-rate priest, Melkor is, straight as an arrow. Strange, though—I do not think Reuel would like him.” When he came to Gasparian, his cheerful tone softened. “The one slipping the extra loaves of bread into my day pack would be Gaspar.”

The silent party mounted and left, with only Gasparian looking long over his shoulder in good-bye. Balthazar watched them until they disappeared, swallowed up by the road that reached for Judea.

By habit he looked for the place of the star. Soon it would appear. It would be his only comfort in the lonely, anxious journey back to his village. Oddly, though his direction would be opposite, he knew Reuel’s star would shepherd him home.

“I enjoy a good riddle, Baran. Gaspar and I have discussed long into the night one peculiar and engaging puzzle: How is it, during the times of cruel doubt in the madness of this venture, we seek the star for solace, when the star is the very reason for the journey?” Balthazar chuckled softly; then his smile slipped away as he gazed down the empty road. *I will miss you, Gaspar.*

Baran moaned, and Balthazar moved to tend him. Alazar had draped a length of cloth over the wound, as much to hide its distressing visage as to reduce the repulsive smell. Balthazar peeked under the cloth and tried to think of a few more gods

to curse. If they had found Baran a few days earlier, if Balthazar had his medicaments . . .

Baran was trying to speak. Balthazar leaned close, patting his shoulder. "I am here, my friend. Baran. I am here."

"Gift . . ." The word came in a long whisper from the dried-up mouth.

"Gift?" Balthazar asked.

"Gift."

A motion caught Balthazar's eye, and he looked down to see Baran erratically patting the box on his chest.

Balthazar sighed. "I think Melkor would have liked your gift, Baran. Me, I am not worthy to accept the gift of a—" He caught himself in time. He had nearly said *dying*. He swallowed and tried again. "Of a, a man of such obvious, ah, *dignity* as yourself."

But Baran was shaking his head no.

Balthazar said gently, "Then I am afraid I do not understand. The box is not a gift for me, but it *is* a gift?"

Baran moved his head fractionally in a yes.

"It is a gift for someone special?"

Fractionally, yes.

"For your wife, perhaps? For your betrothed?"

Fractionally, no. The dying man moaned again, distress now visible in his pallor.

Balthazar wet his lips. Baran would soon sleep with his fathers. He leaned closer and tried again. "Baran, do you wish for me to deliver the box to someone in your stead?"

Tears began to seep from the nearly closed eyes.

"Ah. We understand one another. Consider me hired, and you are in luck, my friend—my services are free to all who

wear indigo. It's my favorite color." He patted Baran's arm and added gently, "Rest a minute, Baran; then you can tell me who it is for." He sat back from him, momentarily relieved.

But Baran was not for resting. His hands twitched restlessly. His breath came harder. It seemed as though he were summoning strength. He raised a thin, shaking arm and pointed.

Immediately Balthazar was at his side, looking with him down the length of his arm. "That hillside over there? A village is beyond it?"

Baran weakly shook his head. The arm trembled and stayed where it was.

Balthazar swallowed. Ahriman take him, he did not understand. "Uh, the hillside . . . the box goes to someone past the hill. A name, Baran. I need a name."

But Baran's arm still pointed, trembling harder.

"Save your strength," Balthazar pleaded. "I need a name."

Still Baran pointed. Balthazar felt the bloom of despair at the root of his stomach.

"Please, Baran, *please* save your strength! You need it to tell me the name."

Waxen pallor gave way to scarlet in Baran's strained face. His eyes were tightly closed, teeth bared in furious effort. A low growl began in his throat. His arm shook violently, and Balthazar's despair agitated to a groan.

"I do not understand! Ahriman take me, I do not—"

From habit, for comfort, he sought the place of the star . . .

. . . and saw . . .

. . . Baran's outstretched arm.

He dropped cheek to cheek with Baran and stretched forth

his own arm. He squeezed his eyes shut, held his breath, quieted his heart, and opened his eyes.

In the newly twilight horizon, balanced on the tip of his fingernail and Baran's, was the soft cool glow of . . .

"The star," Balthazar breathed.

Baran's face cleared. His arm dropped.

And now Balthazar began to tremble.



The old man replaced the fitting in the waterskin and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He studied the sky and chose a star low on the horizon to be his old companion Gasparian.

"You were not surprised to see me, old friend, when I caught up with you the next day."

Reuel's star was now gone, but the comforting madness that had accompanied the star had never left him. That same comforting madness had him here again to trek the journey of old. There was no star to follow this time—only the memory of a silver box inlaid with lapis lazuli . . . and a name.

"The name guides me as the star did, Gaspar."

He pointed west to show Gasparian. It was as if the name hung in the sky, above the place of his destination.

"I am not sure what I am to do with the box once I find it again," he admitted to Gasparian's star. "Surely the frankincense is gone by now."

He rummaged in his pack for bread, tore off a piece, and began to eat.

"You know," he said with his mouth full, eyebrows quirked, "it was a fine-quality frankincense. Melkor would not have

known that. But I knew. You see, Gaspar, old friend, in my village some came to offer frankincense to Ahura Mazda's flame. The greater the adoration—" he shrugged—"or the richer the adorer, the greater quality the frankincense. Baran's frankincense was fine indeed, first harvest. He paid a small fortune to fill that box." He smiled, pausing mid-chew. "Maybe it took a first-rate herbalist and a second-rate priest to know." He glanced about the sky and chose another star to be Baran.

"I wish I knew if you had made the box yourself. Such exquisite beauty. Such workmanship. The young woman, she was amazed. A gracious thing she was; you would have liked her, Baran. And the child . . . I think he liked your gift too."

He finished his meal and brushed away the crumbs, then stood and shrugged on his shoulder bag and took up the waterskin. He bent to pick up his walking stick and leaned upon it to gaze at Gasparian's star.

"The other riddle we puzzled over as well, did we not, Gaspar: how the star for which men left another to die . . . is the star the same man died for."

His eyes flickered to Baran's star, and slowly Balthazar smiled.

"A great company I am in on this grand and splendid evening," he declared as he started down the knoll. "A great company indeed."

His journey lay west and north, to Galilee this time, to find the silver box inlaid with lapis lazuli and the one the comforting madness called . . . James.

1

HE DID NOT KNOW what to call them. They were not Essenes, nor were they Zealots. Some were not even Jewish. He watched the latest two retreat down the slope that led to his home. The tall one, the ruder of the two, looked over his shoulder to stare boldly at James. The fact that these pilgrims never got what they came for pleased him greatly. To be sure, the shorter one carried away a pocketful of sawdust, scooped from the floor when he thought James was not looking; no matter. The fool had more sawdust in his head than in his pocket.

They were heading for the village. And how would these visitors find Nazareth? Would they be disappointed to see that it was no different than their own hometown? They would see the same filthy beggars and the same people who did not

notice them. The same smelly streets, the same noisy marketplace. They would hear women arguing prices with the merchants. They would see the usual mix of people in typical Galilean villages: Jews, Gentiles, a few strutting Romans, traveling foreigners. They would see people who lived the hard facts of life, people who sweated and smelled like them.

Would they be as disappointed with Nazareth as they always were with James and his family?

James leaned against the workroom doorway and watched until the two disappeared down the hill. When the first of these strangers had come to visit, James and his brothers had treated them politely. Answered questions, showed them around. Pointed out the corner workbench; they always liked to see that. In the beginning the attention was entertaining. It amused them; truth to tell, it even flattered. Nearly three years later, James was no longer amused.

Many carried away tokens of their visit: a curled shaving from the workroom floor, a pebble from the path, a handful of stone chips from a roof roller James was chiseling. Once he caught Jorah giving tours of the home for two copper prutas per person. Though Mother put an end to that, James thought it time for recompense. At least someone had the sense to make these strangers pay for their intrusions.

What did they expect the home to be like? James saw it all the time, the looks that said their Teacher's home fell short of their expectations.

Those who made it past the workroom, and precious few did, came to the smallyard, an area where the sleeping rooms, the main courtyard, and the workroom converged. In the smallyard was the cistern. If there the stranger turned

right, he would walk a few steps through a cool stone passage that opened left into the foreroom where the brothers slept, then the aftroom where Mother and Jorah slept. If instead the stranger went past the smallyard, he would find himself in the courtyard. There he would see Mother's oven in one corner, those corner walls blackened from smoke. He would see pots to dye wool, pans for cooking, a grindstone for wheat and barley, a small loom for cloth. He would see a shelter of coarse cloth covering half the courtyard, under which Mother and Jorah made food, cleaned and carded wool, and mended baskets, tunics, and sandals.

The strangers would see a home much like their own, if they were neither poor nor rich. They would see nothing remarkable. Nothing to account for an unordinary man in an ordinary world.

But they needed a name. James had a few he called them privately, names of which Mother would not approve. He rubbed his lower lip, looking at the place where the last two had disappeared. The tall one had looked long at James and the home . . . perhaps to put them in his memory to tell his grandchildren.

What would James tell his own?

He shoved off from the doorway to turn into the workroom and noticed the gouge in a ridge of sawdust on the floor. He bent and picked up a handful himself, rubbing the coarse wooden filings between his fingers. What did they do with it? Sprinkle it on sick relatives? He shook it away and went to his bench.

Jesus-ites. Nazarites would work, except it was taken. *Nazarenes* would fit, but were not all the occupants of

Nazareth called Nazarenes? He could just imagine how the villagers would take it, mistaken for followers of Joseph's son.

He picked up a hunk of cypress, hefted it in his hand, looked down the length of it. Five palms long, four fingers wide. He picked up his measuring stick, ever hearing his father's voice when he did so—*"Twice measured is once cut—"* and rechecked the measure. He would soon fashion the length into a replacement support for a threshing sledge. He ran his thumb over a knot, traced calloused fingertips along the grain, then tossed the chunk of wood onto the ground next to the thresher and wearily rubbed his eyebrows.

They came more frequently now—two, three times a week. Some were shy, some as rude as this last visitor. Some came to argue the Torah and the Prophets, some to rouse support for another go at an uprising. Some treated James and his family with a sickening awe, others with pity, as from a strange self-righteousness. He was not sure which he hated more.

Those in the village were too eager to give directions to the seekers. James did not blame them, after all. Fair trade for the notoriety inflicted upon Nazareth. Last week he overheard a merchant giving cheerful directions: "Straight up the main road, past the well; you will come to a home on the left; that would be Eli's place. The home past that one, up the hill, is Joseph's place." The seeker had turned away, with the trader calling after him, "Be sure to ask for a relic! They love to give away relics!" Then he laughed with the customers at his stall.

James knelt and looked under his workbench. In the corner against the wall was a box full of seasoned pieces of wood for carving. He dragged the box to himself and brought it to the top of the bench, where he rummaged through it, holding

certain pieces out from under the awning to see them in the sun. He remembered this one with the crook at the end. A remnant of the olive tree he had sectioned off last summer. He had thought to fashion a water dipper out of that crook. He laid it on the table and rummaged some more.

Time was when he was James ben Joseph. Time was when James, Joses, Simon, Judas, Devorah, and Jorah were all children ben Joseph, the carpenter. Now he was James, brother of the scourge of Nazareth.

Here was an oblong chunk of sycamore. Maybe Jude had put it into the box; he didn't remember it. Perhaps left over from the synagogue project. He turned it over. Make a nice platter, maybe a good oblong bowl. When was the last time he had carved? With jobs and projects and the time-wasting seekers to fill their days, he didn't often have the leisure for this pastime.

"This is the carpenter's home?"

He slowly put the piece of sycamore back into the box, resting his hands on the edge.

He looked over his shoulder and squinted at the young man who stood in the doorway, gazing at the workroom. He was younger than James by at least ten years—maybe eighteen or nineteen. He had wild reddish-brown hair barely kept in place with a thin leather tie circling his head. A vain attempt at a beard gave him a dusky jawline. When James did not answer, the lad's wandering gaze came back, showing his brightly colored eyes.

"Is this the carpenter's—"

"We are bread makers," James cut him off, with a gesture at the workroom. "What do you think the wood and stone is for?"

On the heel of the young man's startled look came a grin. "You must be James. Annika said I remind her of you."

For the first time since the seekers left, the knot inside began to loosen. "You are Nathanael?"

The young man nodded and stepped inside, inhaling deeply. "Smells wonderful in here." He picked up a handful of stripped cypress bark and held it to his nose, closing his eyes as he breathed deeply. "I love cypress. I've missed it."

James noticed that Nathanael did not kiss the mezuzah fixed to the doorjamb, but he did not care. Religious Jew or nonreligious Jew, as long as he was not one of the seekers. Annika hadn't said much about Nathanael, only that he was new to Nazareth and in need of work.

"Have you worked with wood before?"

"I apprenticed with my uncle. Once in a while."

Hands clasped behind his back, Nathanael gave himself a tour. He strolled under the shade of the awnings, erected at the top of the walls to shelter the workbenches from the late-winter rains. He came first to Judas' bench, appraising every detail. Most of Jude's tools were hung neatly on a rack above the bench; some were jumbled less neatly on the table. He passed James' bench; James watched his amber-hued eyes, a different color for these parts, whisk eagerly over everything. He stopped at Father's bench near the passage to the small-yard. Father's bench looked more like what it had become, the catchall spot for odds and ends. Opposite Father's bench was the fire pit. He crossed the room to the pit, looked it over, then walked past Joses' bench and Simon's bench and came to stand at the bench in the corner.

The corner workbench was the only one without wood chips near it. It was as neat and tidy as the day it was left. The tiny wooden boat James had carved when he was seven

still lay where it always had, on the shelf above the bench in the corner, tilted on its side. A little vase Jorah had made was on the other side of the shelf. Jesus would put a sprig of fresh herbs or a posy of wildflowers in it.

Nathanael reached for one of the tools. James gave an involuntary start but held fast. It was the first time in three years . . .

Nathanael did not see his reaction. He turned the heavy gouge adze over in his hands, thumbed the curved blade. "It's a little rusty. Needs a fresh edge. Where is your grinding stone?"

"Outside, by the steps to the roof." Nathanael started for the door, but James said, "We need to talk first."

Nathanael stiffened. Studying the adze edge, he said flatly, "You hired someone else."

James regarded the young man, who now had a defiant set to his jaw. Annika, the woman who could not spare her tongue to save her life, had not offered much information about this lad.

James took a stool and gestured to another by Jose's bench—away from the corner. "Please, sit. Rest yourself. Don't I get a full ear of how far our place is every time Annika brings the eggs?"

"What is far?" Nathanael muttered. "She is an old woman."

On the way to the stool he studied the adze as though he would rather be sharpening it. He took the stool, then looked straight at James with those strange-hued eyes. "If you do not want me, just say it."

James pulled back. "If we do not want you . . . ? That is not the question. The question is if you want us. Our apprentices come and go. Nobody wants to stay."

"Why not?"

James cocked his head, squinting at him. "What did Annika tell you about us?"

The lad shrugged. "That you needed an apprentice. And that you have a pretty sister."

Annika the matchmaker. Annika the meddler. "She did not say anything else?"

"What's there to say? You need help; I need work."

A movement at the doorway caught James' eye. "It isn't that simple," he muttered as he took in the group of three now standing at the door.

The familiar knot returned to his stomach, hardening to a fist of iron.

The girl in the middle chattered to the boys next to her in a lordly way, gesturing toward the workroom. Keturah. She used to come for carving lessons, trading cucumbers for instruction. But the young men with her, near Nathanael's age, he had never seen before. James rose from his stool.

"Hello, James," the girl said airily, as if she spoke to him in the market all the time. To the boys she said, "That is his brother, the next oldest. His other brothers, Joses and Simon, are still away on a trading trip. Aren't they, James?" When James did not answer, she chattered on. "Judas just left for Capernaum; he should be back in a week or so."

She pointed to the corner workbench. "Over there. That is where he worked. He was the one who taught me to carve. He was the best wood-carver in Galilee."

"Simon is the best," James stated.

She only glanced at him. "He carved a bowl for my grandmother," she told the boys. "Finest bowl I have ever seen. It's her favorite."

The girl would not be able to tell apart a bowl carved by Simon or—

“Do you have business here, Keturah?” James asked, and reached for his mallet.

Her brown-eyed look flickered over him. “So, you remember my name.” Some of her lordliness softened.

“I remember,” James said quietly.

He used to feel like a lumbering fool around her. Every time she came to the shop, every time he saw her in the marketplace . . . instant idiot is what he would become. But after her favorite wood-carver left, she stopped coming around. And James’ trips to the market became fewer. He glanced at her tunic. She was wearing lavender again.

He realized he did not feel stupid around her anymore, and strangely, the thought brought a flicker of sadness.

She was already pointing out another attraction to the boys.

“Do you have a loom that needs mending?” he said, his voice tight. “Stones to be cut, a tool to be sharpened? Do you have *business* here, Keturah, or are you here to waste my time?”

He had learned something about the seekers: the ruder he was, the quicker they left. He had never been so rude when his father was alive. He never imagined he could be so rude.

She broke off midsentence to stare at him. “I—no. I was only—”

“I have work to do,” James snapped. He pointed with the mallet to the outdoors beyond them. He did not miss the darkening of her cheeks.

“This is his brother?” one of the lads muttered, looking James up and down as he crossed the threshold and sauntered into the workroom.

“Not much like him, is he, Avi,” the other commented, upper lip pulled to sneer.

The iron fist lurched painfully in James' stomach, and he gripped the mallet handle convulsively as the hatred flared. They did this. They touched off something inside him that ought never have been touched.

God of Israel, help me now, because I surely want to kill them.

The one called Avi pulled himself tall. “How is it you are not out there with him? Why does not a single brother of his help him?” He snorted. “I would give anything to be one of his twelve. Anything! You are his own brother, and you cannot find the time of day even to listen to him.”

“The Teacher said it himself, Avi.” The other lad shrugged and stepped into the workroom after his friend. “A prophet will have honor, but not from those of his own household.”

God of Israel . . .

Any words but those . . . any words that filtered back to the workroom but those words. The images of the one day Jesus had come back to Nazareth, and what happened in the synagogue . . . the memory rioted his senses, flooding his gut with torment.

“You do not even care.” Avi's voice dripped scorn, and he shook his head. “This whole village is crazy.”

Keturah's fists went to her hips. “I did not bring you here to flail your tongue. Come. It is time for us to leave.”

“The greatest leader our people has seen since Judah the Maccabee, and we sit around sawing wood,” Avi scoffed. He brushed past Keturah as he strolled to the bench in the corner.

“*Now* is the time to throw off the Roman yoke! We did it to the cursed Syrian Greeks; we can do it to the cursed Romans.

And throw out all the rest of the Gentiles as well. This is *our* land. God has seen and heard, and the time of the Jew has come once more.”

His dark eyes glittered as he placed both palms lightly on the surface of the workbench, either in wonder or perhaps to infuse himself with residual power.

“The time is coming soon, I can feel it,” he whispered. “He will declare soon, and I will be there when he does.”

Oddly, the rage in James’ stomach diffused and died away.

“Just leave,” James whispered. The crooked piece of olive-wood, his whittling knife . . .

Day after day, for nearly three years, he had heard it all. From the passionate Zealots like this one, from the gentler and much more polite Essenes. From the Pharisees, the Sadducees. From other sectarians whose tenets blurred into the rest. From synagogue leaders, and once a Temple leader. Even from Annika the meddler. Everybody had an opinion about Joseph’s son.

Interesting, the effect these people had on his family. They set Simon to studying with fury, draping himself over the family’s two scrolls any chance he could get. They caused gentle Joses to plead and argue. They made Judas hide. And all James wanted to do was carve.

“Five hundred years of foreign domination! Persia, Greece, Egypt . . .”

If it were not for the fact there wasn’t any money in it, not real money, he would carve all day and fashion beauty out of jagged castoffs of sycamore, cedar, and oak. He would save for some fancy imported pieces, get them from Amos in Gaza.

“. . . has heard and he will give us back our land. Jesus is

our prophet to speak the word of God and *unite* us! That's the key! Unity!"

Satinwood from the East, that sparkled in the sun. Purple-heart from Africa, with a hue so deeply rich and luxuriant no stain could ever match it. Rub it with olive oil is all.

"Somebody needs to talk to him! I have tried, but those fool fishermen will not let me near him. He needs to know the plan! Raziel from Kerioth—"

James looked at Avi sharply. "Do not say that name here."

"What? You do not wish to have your brother's name associated with a man of real courage and honor?"

"My brother is not an insurrectionist," James said between his teeth. He flicked a glance out the workroom door. All it would take was one passing Roman . . .

"None of his brothers believe in him. They are all cowards," Avi's friend said scornfully.

"You are right, Joab." Avi's tone oozed disdain. "The only one with courage is the Teacher himself. Out there daily with the *people*."

On her way to escort out her overly zealous guest, Keturah leaned toward James and whispered, "I am sorry."

She took Avi's arm and said, "We must go." He angrily shook her off.

"Are you all blind? The time is now! We have to be united! All he has to do is say the word, and thousands will be at his side! The cause is everything. Everything! Anyone who does not agree is not Jewish."

To his left, James caught movement. Jorah stood in the passageway to the smallyard with the sackcloth flap pulled to

the side. “What is all the shouting in here?” she demanded, brushing aside a curled wisp of hair with floury fingers.

“With his powers and our swords, we could gouge the side of Rome and bring Caesar’s empire crashing down!”

Jorah rolled her eyes. “Not again,” she groaned, and let the flap fall back into place.

“Never before has Israel seen these miracles! I myself tasted of the bread he brought down from heaven. I have never tasted anything more delicious. Surely a thousand times better than manna.”

James had heard others claim the same, yet Joses had been there that day. He reported that it tasted no different than Mother’s loaves. It was probably where Jesus got the recipe.

“. . . realize what can be done? No need to pack supplies! Do you realize what kind of strategic military advantage that would have? Raziel says all we have to do is—”

“Don’t say that name!” James thundered at him.

“I have to get to Jesus!” Avi thundered back.

“How would you like a personal audience with him?” Nathanael drawled.

The Zealot snapped his mouth shut, blinking in surprise. James slowly turned to stare at the lad on the stool who toyed with the gouge adze.

“You—you could do this?” Avi stammered, with a fast exchange of glances with his friend. “You could get me a personal audience?”

“Of course.” Nathanael shrugged, as if it were a petty thing. He rose from the stool and strolled to Avi at the corner bench, all the while inspecting the curved blade of the heavy adze. He lounged conversationally against the bench,

thumbing the adze blade. He lifted the blade even with his eyes, then looked at Avi beyond it and with a wicked smile softly said, "I will give you a chance to experience his healing powers firsthand."

It had been so long since James had laughed, his own outburst startled him.

The greedy excitement in Avi's face shriveled to contempt.

Nathanael spread his arms wide, carelessly swinging the adze so that Avi jumped aside. "What?" Nathanael asked innocently. "It's perfect! What better way to get his attention? He heals you; you tell him the plan . . . brilliant." He suddenly frowned and puffed out his cheeks. "Of course you might bleed to death before you get to him, and that would not be good. But the cause is everything, right? We have to be willing to take a little risk." He went to drape his arm about Avi in brotherhood, but Avi ducked away.

James could not stop laughing. He sat down hard in his stool and laughed himself to aching. The curtain flap twitched aside, and Jorah's wondering face appeared.

Avi was slinking away.

"Avi!" Nathanael reproached, arms wide. "Brother! I said I could get you an audience." His face lit in sudden inspiration. "We could practice on your friend! Find out exactly how long it takes him to bleed to death. What is your name? Joab? Come here, Joab." He traced a few practice swoops in the air.

Joab ducked out the door with Avi close behind him. Keturah ran to the doorway, where she stopped and yelled, "My coppers, you thieves!" Over her shoulder she flashed a smile at Nathanael and James, then flew out the door, shouting, "Stop, you thieving cheats!"

James went to the doorway and watched the three race down the path. He laughed again delightedly and yelled, "Look at them run!"

Mother joined Jorah at the curtain, smiling a mystified smile at her boy. "What was that all about?" she said.

Jorah folded her arms and looked at Nathanael, who, with a pleased grin on his face, twirled the adze between both fore-fingers. James came away from the doorway, shaking his head at Nathanael and chuckling.

"Too bad Judas missed that," James said.

"I don't know who you are," Jorah said to Nathanael, "but I have not heard my brother laugh in forever. For that you will join us for the midmeal."

Grinning, Nathanael looked from the adze to Jorah, and his grin promptly faltered. James caught the look, and his own smile finally came down. He knew well the look. Probably how he appeared the first time he saw Keturah.

Jorah swept an up-and-down look at Nathanael, then whirled away.

Mother nodded at the young man. "You must be the lad Annika told us about."

Nathanael straightened and ducked his head respectfully. "Yes, I am."

Mother folded her arms and, with her eyes twinkling, said, "How do you like living with Annika?"

Nathanael darted a look at James. "I—she—"

"Annika is a wonderful woman, I am sure you have discovered," Mother said.

"That she is," Nathanael replied, not meeting her eyes.

"Do join us for the meal," Mother urged. She glanced at

James. "I want to know what made my son laugh." She disappeared behind the curtain.

Visibly relieved, Nathanael resumed his slouch at the workbench.

James went to the passage and held the curtain aside to watch Mother's retreat. Then he let the curtain fall back and turned to Nathanael. "Now, what do you *really* think of Annika?"

Nathanael snorted. "Sounds like you know her."

James straddled a stool at his bench and picked up the crooked piece of olivewood. "All my life. She is more of an aunt than a family friend. She is a grandmother to every child in Nazareth; they all adore her. The opinions of the adults are different."

Nathanael hesitated, then said quietly, "I have never met anyone like her."

James raised his eyes from the wood. He watched the lad look around the shop.

"My uncle never kept his place so neat." Nathanael shook his head. He jerked a thumb at Jude's bench. "The amount of tools you have . . . I have never seen so many, let alone so many sizes."

James pried off a piece of bark from the olivewood. "Tools are a hobby for Judas. We have a decent set for every bench. 'He who does not teach his son a trade brings him up to be a robber.' My father used to say that."

"My father is a drunk."

James pursed his lips, nodding. He broke off more bark. "Anything else?"

Nathanael folded his arms. "My mother is a whore."

James shifted his jaw, then offered, “My brother walks on water.”

“Anything else?”

James studied him long before he could answer. He liked what he saw in those strange bright eyes, liked the defiant tilt in the chin. He liked this boy, and he already feared for him.

“Yes, I am afraid there is something else,” James said, resting the olive piece on his lap. “Work for me, and you will regret it. You will be scorned and ridiculed, sometimes refused trade in the marketplace. Some cowards will throw things at you when you pass. They will spread rumors about you and shun you in the synagogue. Some will cross to the other side of the street when they see you coming, people you have known all your life. People who used to be friends.

“Your chances of a decent marriage will be ruined, unless you choose to marry one of the—seekers. You will have more interruptions to your work in one day than you will have visits to the brush. You will deal with fanatics and with fools. And if you are used to being liked, forget about it. Forget all about it, because you will be hated.” He broke off to smile grimly. “Work for me, Nathanael, and your life will be misery.”

A gleam came into Nathanael’s eye, and with it a slow grin. “I have not had such an offer in a long time.”

“I hope you refuse it. I like you.”

Nathanael stretched his legs out and folded his arms. “Let me see . . . they won’t have much chance to shun me in the synagogue since I am a bad Jew and do not go. If they throw things at me, well, I can hit a gecko at fifty paces—I will keep a rock or two handy. Being scorned and such . . .” He lifted his hands and shoulders. “My mother is a whore. I have been

scorned since birth. So I hate to disappoint you, but I accept your offer.”

James smiled. “You will live to regret it.”

“From what you tell me, I can only hope so.” He looked about the shop. “Where do you want me?”

James hesitated. All of the other apprentices had worked at Father’s bench, or alongside Judas and James. The corner bench had been vacant for three years.

He had hoped . . .

Jorah called them from the courtyard to the midday meal.

Nathanael looked at James, who waved him on. “I will join you in a moment.”

Nathanael set the gouge adze down on the corner bench and went to the passage. The curtain flap swished behind him.

James lingered to look at the tools hanging above the corner bench.

Sounds and smells drifted into the workshop from the almost-spring day outside: the bray of neighbor Eli’s cantankerous donkey, some children shouting to one another, the fragrance of rain and of wet grasses and of early spring wildflowers. From the courtyard he heard Jorah laugh, heard the soft clatter of a lid on a cook pot.

He remembered the way it used to be. On a day like today it might be his turn to check the barley crop on their terraced strip of land. Or he might have gone to Capernaum with Jude. He might have been on the way home from the late-winter trip to Gaza, back when Jesus and James did much of the trading.

He had not taken a journey since the last one with Jesus, three and a half years ago. James could not even remember the

last time he had walked their own land, one terrace up from Eli's. Simon had taken over the planting and weeding, and in the late spring and summer, the watering. And Jude went on the trips alone, or with Josés. James stayed here, under the sky within these four walls.

"Somebody has to stay," he whispered to himself.

"James, are you coming?"

"Yes." He cleared his throat. "Yes, I'm coming."

He tossed the crooked olive piece back into the carving box, set the box on the floor, and shoved it into the corner. He set his mallet on the pegs, then went to the corner bench, where he replaced the gouge adze on the empty peg just so, then adjusted it. He stepped back to look, because he would not see it this way again. Then he saw the tiny, tilted boat on the corner of the shelf.

On sudden furious impulse, he lunged for the toy. He ran out the doorway, stumbling as he went. He reared back and whipped the little boat as far as he could. It sailed long in the air, then bounced and skittered down the slope.

Author's Note

Then he appeared to James . . .

I CORINTHIANS 15:7 (ESV)

“That there was a meeting of James and the risen Christ is certain. What passed at that sacred and intimate moment we shall never know. But we do know . . . James who had been the hostile and unsympathetic opponent of Jesus became His servant for life, and His martyr in death.”

WILLIAM BARCLAY, *The Letters of James and Peter*

Research is to writing what a hinge is to a door. The story of James turns on John 7:5: “Not even his brothers believed in him” (ESV). It turns on 1 Corinthians 15:7, where we learn that Jesus appeared to James after his resurrection. It turns on Acts 1:13–14, where we learn James was with the believers in Jerusalem before Pentecost. The epistle of James is certainly a hinge, and in some fascinating historical documents, I found other hinges as well.

The early Jewish historian Flavius Josephus speaks of the martyrdom of James in his *Antiquities of the Jews*. Eusebius, a Greek Christian writer (circa 260–339), draws his account of James from an earlier writer, Hegesippus, a Jewish Christian historian who belonged to the first generation after the apostles. Jerome, Latin Bible translator and scholar (circa

347–419), refers in his writings to a fragment of an apocryphal Gospel of the Hebrews, which provides another account of Jesus' appearance to James after the Resurrection.

From the sources outside canonized Scripture, I pick and choose what I actually believe about James. For instance, I would like to believe Hegesippus, that James' knees were reputed to be as leathery as a camel's, from his earnest habitual prayer upon them. The idea of James refusing to eat until he saw Jesus risen from the dead, as Jerome quotes the apocryphal Gospel of the Hebrews, is the dramatic sort of thing writers love. Eusebius even says that James was so esteemed for his righteousness, by Jew and Gentile alike, that the sack of Jerusalem in 70 ad was payback for the martyrdom of James the Righteous. (This may have been news to Vespasian and Titus. If the Romans had no qualms about crucifying Jesus, it is doubtful they would have torn their garments over his younger brother—let alone level an entire city.)

These historical documents contain fascinating hinges, but we cannot be certain what is true. Even in the event of James' martyrdom, we have options: Hegesippus says he was thrown from the parapet of the Temple, then stoned because the fall didn't kill him, then clubbed because the stoning didn't kill him. Josephus doesn't mention the Temple at all, nor the clubbing; only that James was delivered along with others to be stoned on a charge of breaking the Law.

The hinges in the Bible hold the most fascination for me. It was the life of James, not his death; his unbelief, then his belief; what he said and what he didn't say that gets my attention. I wonder why he never once mentioned his common blood with Jesus? Instead of beginning his famous epistle with "James, a

blood brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, so listen up . . . ,” he opened with “James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” He went from blood brother to bond-servant, and for me it means the story of James is not about James at all.

The hinges I found in books reminded me of the shells and stones I found in Israel.

I tend toward sentimentality, and arrival in Israel for contextual research was only the beginning of a sticky, humid, nonstop epiphany. As we walked out of the Tel Aviv airport, I breathed to my husband, “Jack, Jesus walked here.” When I got out of the car in Nazareth I said, “Jack, Jack . . . Jesus walked here.” When we walked along the beach of the Sea of Galilee, Jack snapped the coolest picture of a trail of my footprints on the shore. I picked up shells and stones and crooned, “Jack . . . Jeeee-sus walked here!”

The headiness had me fit to walk on water. I was about to attempt it when Jack spoke.

For the whole trip, he had remained silent while listening to my impassioned ruminations. While I bawled and sprawled and wailed over a stone Jesus may have kicked with his sandal toe, Jack maintained an indifference that irritated me. It was on the shore of Galilee when Jack had had enough.

“Tracy.” He put his hand on his chest and said, “Jesus walked here.”

It’s neat to think the stone I brought home was kicked by Jesus. And maybe the fact that James had blood in common with Jesus awed a few people he hung around with; James himself had enough indifference not to record it. Stones in Israel, hinges in history books, even common blood—all quite interesting.

Rich Mullins said, "Where are the nails that pierced his hands? Well, the nails have turned to rust, but behold the Man."

What if James had knees like a camel, and what if people thought he might walk on water too, and what if we put Josephus and Eusebius in a ring and let them fight it out while we placed our bets? I fancy James himself wouldn't care what the historians said about him. If we asked him about his knees or what was up in 1 Corinthians 15:7 or what exactly happened at his death, I fancy he'd only shrug and say something like my husband did that day in Galilee, just one thing:

Jesus walked here.

Tracy Groot