

Elements

The transfiguration of Elijiah



earth

A Priest of the Oriental Church

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Elements – I Earth

The Transfiguration of Elijah

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This novel is a work of historical fiction. The incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination.

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*To my wife.
To my kids.
To all the Elijahs out there.*

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earth.

When God wanted to create fish, He spoke to the sea.

*When God wanted to create trees, He spoke to the
earth.*

*But when God wanted to create man, He turned to
Himself.*

*“Let Us make man in Our image and in Our
likeness”.*

*If you take a fish out of the water it will die;
and when you remove a tree from the earth, it will
also die.*

*Likewise, when man is removed from God, he dies.
~author unknown*

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Genesis

Elijah. A name that means my Lord is *Jah* or YHWH— the Lord is the I AM WHO I AM. Elijah was born to middle class immigrant parents in the mid 70s. His parents left Egypt in order to begin a new life. He came shortly after their move to Canada. Born on the first day of the Coptic new year — the first of *Tout*— which coincides with September 11. Little did Elijah know that the day that marked his entrance into existence would be a day that would forever change his life. The first of *Tout* also marks the Coptic feast of the *Nairouz* — the feast of the Martyrs.

The Coptic people have a complicated history.

The Coptic people, said Elijah's father George, have been persecuted for eighteen of the twenty centuries. First, it was the Romans, then the Greeks, then the Muslims. We have had no peace. We have had the blood of the martyrs fill the streets!

George and his wife Sally had experienced their own share of persecution as university students in their days in Egypt. They never did tell Elijah what happened to them. But they would tell stories of professors failing their students simply because they were Christian. Stories of the inability of Coptic people in Egypt to build churches or even to fix a single toilet in the church without seeking governmental approval! Stories of being kicked out of stores and being refused service at restaurants were the norm at the dinner table.

Dad, said five year old Elijah, did that happen to you?

No, it didn't. But my neighbor's nephew was failed simply for being Christian. It was horrible. He had to redo his last year of Engineering. There was nothing he can do. It was horrible.

George and Sally were proud to be Coptic. They instilled this in young Elijah. But it was always a mystery to Elijah, even at a young age, how proud his parents were to be members of the Church of the martyrs and why they escaped from persecution and wanted to come to the land of the better life. But for five year old Elijah, this paradox would have to be buried into the depth of his soul, until the day it would erupt and change the landscape of his life. For now, Elijah just trusted that his parents were always right— as you know children would rather believe they are wrong than ever imagine their parents to be wrong.

And so George, Sally and little Elijah pursued the better life.

For the Coptic people in the diaspora, there were only two institutions that existed. The school and the church. And for many, that was the order. This was true for Elijah's highly educated parents. Both George and Sally had burned many candles before many icons for the sake of little Elijah so he could begin to speak. The first words that Elijah ever spoke— besides the unintelligible cooing of a baby— were Jah, in reference to himself, or maybe it was in reference to God... He spoke for the first time at the age of four. Before that, Elijah lived a deep deep silence. Poor George and Sally were devastated fearing for the worst... that their only son would be unable to speak for the rest of his life. That he would not be able to become the doctor or the engineer that they had dreamt he would become.

They fasted Wednesdays and Fridays faithfully. Lent. Apostles' fast. St Mary's fast. Advent fast. All of those days,

George and Sally were vegan— faithfully vegan— reading the ingredients on labels vegan.

Sally, is whey powder vegan? Sally, do modified milk ingredients count as milk?

Shame on you George! Don't you want little Eli to speak? Shame on you for even asking!

Every night, George and Sally faithfully stood at the foot of their bed as they prayed the *Agpeya*— the Coptic book of the hours. This small book would become one of Elijah's closest friends. They stood, as their feet were throbbing from a long day of work, and prayed and prayed. They always prayed that Elijah would speak. This was their obsession and their only concern.

The deep silence was finally broken. One word.

Jah.

George and Sally hugged and cried for joy. Each mumbling prayers of thanksgiving to their patron saints. It was the blessing of *Baba Kyrillos*, said George. No it was *Abu Sefein*, corrected Sally. *Yalla* Elijah, say it again. Yes! Say it again.

Jah.... Jah.... Jah Jah.

First words are very important. Just as most babies' first words are either Mama or Dada, their words express a desire to return to their source. This was true for little Elijah. And so ended Elijah's *first* deep silence.

Exodus

In the garden of Eden it is said that Adam and Eve were complete, whole and in total harmony with God, nature, each other and themselves. It was only after the fall that the mind found itself wandering far from the heart. It is only after Adam chose to be master of himself that he became distracted, divided and dual.

Jah Jah, as George now called him, was definitely still living in Eden. He seemed to be the embodiment of innocence and primordial simplicity. This was disconcerting for George who wanted his now six year old to be more independent, wise and critical in his thinking.

Elijah on the other hand was happy to just observe the world around him. He was happy to spend hours rubbing his hands against the different tree barks in the forest bordering their backyard. Each tree scraping against his sensitive hands spoke a language that he seemed to understand. Each telling it's story of surviving harsh winter nights and smoldering summer days. Squirrels and robins alike left their invisible marks on the tree as they landed or climbed for safety. Sometimes, Sally would find Elijah weeping with his arms around a tree, hugging it. The stories he heard communicated deep in his heart were sometimes overwhelming for him. Elijah, knew deep in his heart that the whole world was deeply connected to him. He could not express this in words of course, being only six years old, but he didn't need to. He lived it. He breathed it. Everything seemed to speak to him

and he loved to speak back. For example, one day he decided to pick up an earth worm and ask her questions.

Do you enjoy living under the earth? Are you afraid of being forgotten by the rest of us? Sometimes, I wish to hide under the earth too. It must be so quiet there.

This all concerned George. One day, enough was enough for George, and so he, like a good parent, went to the Zellers on his way back from work and bought Elijah an Atari. It came with two joysticks and a Pac-Man cartridge. George was convinced that he was going to teach his son about real life. There was no time to hug trees and talk to earth worms. Engineers and doctors. They lived in the real world. They made money. They lived the better life. Pac-Man, George proudly thought, was going to be the perfect lesson for his son. *You see son, he was daydreaming about his speech, you see son, life is like Pac-Man. The goal is to get as much as you can without being eaten by your enemies. Sometimes, when you get these big ones, YOU can eat your enemies. Isn't that so exciting?*

George, came home and setup the Atari. Of course, technology never cooperates the way it is supposed to. After playing around with the switcher that was attached to the antenna, he finally got Pac-Man to show up on the 12 inch color TV that was sitting in the living room. He smiled at Pac-Man, as one would a good friend, and thought to himself—*Elijah is going to love this game! Fun and learning, what more could he ask for?*

Jah Jah! Jah Jah! *Yalla Habibi!* I have a surprise for you!

...

Ya Sally! Where is Elijah?

To their shock, they found Elijah sitting outside with a majestic cardinal sitting only two feet away from him. It looked as though they were in deep conversation. The cardinal's red head was turned towards Elijah and he looked very intently at him. The cardinal sang a short tune as it was

bopping its head. Elijah slowly extended his hand. Mr. Cardinal accepted the invitation. He hopped slowly towards Elijah. *This moment is magical*, thought Sally. Mr. Cardinal was about to step into Elijah's hand. Sally was mesmerized.

ELIJAH!

As soon as George's voice reached Elijah's ears he found Mr. Cardinal had already leapt to the sky and flew off. Sally could have sworn that the cardinal seemed sad in his flight. For Sally, as a child, spoke to earthworms too. How could she know what a sad cardinal flight looked like if she herself hadn't conversed with a few herself. The child within her, the one who was mesmerized just a moment ago, pushed out a big wet bead of a tear to the rim of her eyelid. Adult Sally wacked her husband with the back of her hand on his shoulder.

George! You couldn't just wait for the cardinal to land on Jah Jah's hand?

What she said inwardly was... *George, why can't we be like kids? Couldn't you just let the cardinal land on my hand? Why did you take me away from my parents'?* However, she didn't allow herself to give attention to those movements in her heart. And the moment she suppressed it, the inner child also drowned inside. *You are an adult, Sally. Get yourself together.*

Come Elijah. I have something to show you.

As the three of them made their way into the living room, George could not hide his excitement and pride at what he knew would be a great surprise for his son.

This, Elijah, is an ATARI. Look. You put the game cartridge here in the middle. You have to push down well. Then you turn on the switch behind the TV. Come. Look. You do it like this. And voila! You have Pac-Man! I'll show you how it works. You grab the joy stick. This gives you control over what happens on the screen. This big red button starts the game.

OK— watch closely. You see!!! Look! Pac-Man is going to the left, down, left again, up. You see! I am the one who is controlling him.

George. Your son won't care about this. He just want's to be outside.

COME! Elijah. Come! You try it! You see Elijah. Pac-Man is not just a game. It is like real life *Habibi*. You have to try and get the most out of life. Try to get as much as you can without being eaten by your enemies! George paused his pontification and gave a proud look to his wife. He felt like he was a genius for trying to *fix* his son using a video game. You see these big circles, Jah Jah? They make you powerful. They give you power to eat up your enemies. I want you to understand. You are not a young boy anymore. You are in grade one! Life is serious. You need to work hard so you can become powerful and so you can get as much as you want. This is the good life! So? What do you think?

Elijah, though only six, had an incredibly sober demeanor. It came from his deep deep silence. He looked straight at his dad and said. *Baba*, when will Pac-Man be satisfied? How much will be enough for him?

Elijah, gently put the joystick down, and looked deep into his mom's eyes. Actually he was looking for the little girl inside of her... Thanks dad. It's a great gift.

He walked away from the living room. Went straight for the backyard. Sat on the steps with his hand stretched out. Mr. Cardinal would not come back tonight. Both Elijah and Mr. Cardinal felt quite misunderstood by his dad.

The Atari was sold for \$198 twenty years later. He got that much for it because he promised the guy who bought it from him that it was only played once.

Leviticus

Elijah loved being at church. So did George and Sally of course. But Elijah loved being at church for the same reasons he loved being in the forest with the trees. He absolutely loved to light candles in the back of the church and to talk to St Mary. He called her Mama. *If you are His mama, that somehow makes you my mama too!* The logic was quite simple. He would tell her all about his week... the good, the bad, the ugly. Of course he couldn't look at her straight in the eyes when he was talking about the ugly. But then again Elijah's ugly... well... wasn't anything like the ugly of the children his age.

Mama, yesterday I went to school and I just wanted to be alone. I wanted to be quiet. Remember, Joshua came to me and I just wanted to be alone. I feel bad, because I was not being a good listener. My teacher always tells us that we should practice our listening. She says "Big ears! Little mouths!" To be honest Mama, I think she just wants us to listen to her. I think she has small ears and a big... oh sorry Mama. I don't mean to complain. I love Madame Laurier! Well, I had a little mouth with Joshua. But I also had little ears. I think he was sad that I didn't want to play with him. Mama. Do you ever like being quiet? Do you ever feel like being alone with your Son? When you do get a second alone with Him, can you please say hi to Him. Tell Him that I really can't wait for Christmas. I am sorry about Joshua. I'll try to play with him tomorrow. Mama. Thanks for always having big ears. Oh.

That made you smile? I love making you smile! Mama, do you remember how last week I was going to...

ELIJAH. George whispered. ENOUGH PLAYING WITH THE CANDLES! Be respectful. What are you smiling at. Do you know who you are talking to? That is the Theotokos! You light the candle. You bow your head. You ask her to pray for you and then you come in and stand with me. It's not right to stand here and play with the candles! You can do WHATEVER you want after Liturgy. But now you are in church!!!

What started as a whisper ended more like a low grumble of a yell. By the time George was done, Elijah had already slipped in a wink and a goodbye wave to the Theotokos.

He followed his dad down the church center aisle and tried to avoid the red three point line that was drawn on the floor. He was OK with walking on the dark blue volleyball lines but not the red ones. *Red lines are fire*, thought Elijah. The Coptic people rented school gyms for a good part of the 80s to use for their liturgies.

Coptic history in Canada is complicated.

The first Coptic priest came to Canada in 1964, having been ordained by *Baba* Kyrillos. *Abouna* Marcos Marcos actually was the first Coptic priest in North America. By the late 70s, Coptic churches were sprouting up in many of the cities in Ontario. Most of these, like Elijah's church, were praying in school gyms. Oh how the Coptic people loved their churches. They couldn't see the basketball rims hanging over the altar or the school championship banners on the walls. The row of chairs in the front carrying the printed paintings of the saints was transformed in their hearts into the most majestic iconostasis. The moment *Abouna* used the censor, and the incense started filling the rows of metal fold up chairs, parishioners were transported back to the Mother Church in Egypt. The gym was no more.

The church was so much more than a gathering of believers. The church was the only connection that Coptic immigrants in Canada had with each other. It was their church, their community hall, their social club, their place of rest. Where else could they speak Arabic while eating a *beid* and *basterma* sandwich in fresh pita bread. All difference in opinion and point of view were dissolved as the elders sat around after Liturgy on the same metal chairs turned into circles. The *Tantes* were behind the tables selling the sandwiches while the *Uncles* were drinking their coffees and remembering Egypt. Often they would share tips on how to survive the winter, where the best *foul* beans were sold and how well/bad the deacons did in the Liturgy. One thing was sure. They were Coptic. And they had traditions to maintain.

Kyro, don't chew gum after Liturgy! Miriam, don't cross your legs in church! Mary cover your head, Liturgy is still happening. Mena, stand up, the Gospel is being read! Philo, go tell *Abouna* that you drank a sip of water after midnight. Make sure you tell him BEFORE you have communion. Stephen, take your shoes off before communion.

Elijah was fully aware of the importance of these traditions. Every week in Sunday School, these traditions were gently reiterated. However, Elijah especially loved the stories of the saints. St Mena was by far his favorite, after Mama of course. But there can never be any comparison. She was the mother of God. He loved *Mar Mena*. He loved his two camels too.

I bet their names were Cami and Camu. Elijah thought while standing next to his dad in Liturgy. He thought he would ask *Uncle Onsi* if he knew the camels' names. *Uncle Onsi* was his favorite *Uncle* in the church. He was different. For some reason, he never seemed to bring up all the traditions and never felt the need to remind him of the rules. *Uncle Onsi* always glowed after communion. Elijah watched him week

after week close his eyes after receiving the Eucharist. He watched as his eyebrows furrowed and his facial expression looked like he was pleading with Someone. Elijah knew, from experience, that at some point his face always relaxed, his eyebrows would settle, his cheekbones would slowly rise and a small smile would change the landscape of his face. He wouldn't open his eyes Till he felt the water sprayed liberally by *Abouna* on his face after Liturgy. But even then, it seemed like his eyes were still looking somewhere beyond. He would quietly gather all the things on the altar into a suitcase. *Uncle Onsi reminds me of Someone. Mama? Who does Uncle Onsi remind you of? Maybe he reminds me of Mar Mena! That's it. Mar Mena! Uncle Onsi reminds me of you. I am sure you were just like him. Right?* It is so much easier to speak to saints. You can switch from one saint to the other in mid sentence.

My sweet Elijah! Did you hear the Gospel today? Tell me. What did the Lord tell you today?

No matter what Elijah answered, *Uncle Onsi* always would encourage him to listen to the Lord. Elijah always noticed how *Uncle Onsi's* eyes looked down any time he said the name of Jesus— kind of like a grade eight girl who mentioned the name of the boy she had a crush on. *I want to be like Uncle Onsi when I grow up. He is so special.*

Week after week, George, Sally and Elijah went to church. For Elijah, the people at church were very much like the trees of his beloved forest. Each tree had a different texture. Each tree had its marks left by the robins and the squirrels. Each tree had its story. For Elijah, each person was unique. He loved each person, with their stories and their scars. He loved to hug the trees at his church too. Sometimes he could feel their pain or their joy, and though he was only six, his heart would weep. But of all the trees, he especially loved the ones who would show up in Liturgy, and would hover over the altar... they were special like *Uncle Onsi* was special.

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Numbers

School was a different kind of forest.

Based on his conversation with Mama, Elijah decided he would try to be a better friend to Joshua. So during recess, he tried to ask him many questions.

Joshua. Where do you go to church? Do you know *Mar Mena*? What is your favorite fasting food?

Joshua's puzzled look informed him that he was different. But like everything, Elijah loved to observe the world around him. Elijah wanted to discover more. He quickly learned that Sunday mornings were there for watching cartoons and for hockey practices. People ate the same on Tuesdays and Thursdays as they did on Wednesdays and Fridays. Most kids Elijah's age don't take notice that other people's inner and outer realities are unique. But Elijah always noticed and pondered things in his heart. But it mostly made him feel sad — he wondered who Joshua spoke to in his heart all day. *Mama, can you please take care of Joshua? I think I really like him.*

After recess, *Madame* Laurier returned all their Math quizzes. Elijah smiled back at the smiley face sticker he received on his quiz. The number 97 was written right next to it. *I guess that is a good thing.* Later that day he would discover that “good” was completely relative. When he showed his Math quiz to his dad, and his dad said: “OH MY. WHERE DID YOU LOSE YOUR THREE PERCENT?” Elijah quickly understood that what was good for his teacher was not

necessarily good for his dad. *How can a number mean different things to different people?*

Numbers. Numbers seem to shape a child's view of the world and their view of themselves. This was especially true in the minds of Coptic parents. In Egypt, your marks decided for you what, or rather *who*, you would become. In descending order. Doctors. Engineers. Pharmacists. These were the revered careers that all Coptic parents were praying and hoping for their children. After came a slew of other OK careers. Accountants, bankers, business owners... really sometimes it's just not worth mentioning the whole lot of them. If your marks were not great, then you studied the arts or went into agriculture. Now, a modern sophisticated mind in the twenty first century would say something like— *it doesn't matter what you do as long as you are happy!* This is so far from the truth in Egypt. What you did was who you were. In fact, no one was ever just George. It was either Doctor George or Engineer George or even George the wealthy bank owner. Deep in the modern Coptic mind, education was a way to survive the challenges of being Christian in Egypt. It was an exodus of sorts.

One was reminded of this social totem pole at all times. A doctor's opinion weighed much more than a teacher's opinion. Now this would make sense if the opinion was of a medical nature. But this was not the case. The doctor's opinion about the type of fridge you should buy or the best school to go to or how to teach Math for that matter, was always more respected than anyone else's opinion.

I think Uncle Onsi is a taxi driver, Elijah thought to himself. He must have had really high grades. I love Uncle Onsi. Mama, can you take care of Uncle when he is driving today?

Numbers mean everything. Especially the numbers on a report card. Elijah grew up to understand this as the months and years went by. Report card night was either horrible,

disastrous or cataclysmic.... this of course depended on the marks you had in Math. Respectively, 98%, 97%, 96%. Anything below 96% would be seen as catastrophic, almost irreversible and would trigger endless extra curricular Math worksheets.

Throughout his elementary years, all the way to his grade six graduation (*Although, in the early 80s there was no such thing as a grade six or grade eight graduations. These were hardly seen as milestones. The following generations were much more fragile— especially as a result of the self esteem movement— they felt it necessary to celebrate every possible milestone. Yes, the day has come that a senior kindergarten graduation is a serious event— photographers and all.*) Elijah learned so much in school. It was his nature to be in awe and wonder about everything. However, the majority of what he learned happened outside the classroom. Elijah, now ten years old, was fascinated at how his friends saw the world. Though he never dared to agree with them or imitate them for fear that his parents would find out, Elijah found himself more and more interested in how boys and girls talked about each other, acted around each other and ultimately liked each other.

These feelings scared Elijah deeply.

Numbers are much safer. Three times four always equals twelve. Mama, I am not sure I understand why I feel the way I do... but please help.

+ + +

Innocence is a strange gift. On the one hand it protects the one clothed in her, on the other hand, once shed... it is difficult for one to recover her.

Elijah, walking through the forest, thought how once a tree sheds her leaves, it is difficult for her to recover her foliage. Little did he know that fall was around the corner.

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Deuteronomy

Martina walked into grade seven English class. Elijah's cheeks flushed against his will. *Look forward. Don't look at her. Don't look at her. Why am I looking at her.* She came and sat right next to him. Elijah noticed that her hair was down today. She usually has it up in a pony tail. He also noticed that she was wearing acid washed jeans and her blue sweater. Whenever she wore her blue sweater he would always notice how her deep hazel eyes would pop. Elijah was caught off guard by his thoughts and the attention to detail that he had displayed with regards to Martina. *O Lord, I hope she doesn't notice me. Please, Mama, help me.*

Hey.

Hey. Elijah responded with a pronounced squeak in his voice.

After a long pause, Martina continued:

You are different. You are not like the other boys. What is it?

What do you mean? His heart stuck in his throat and he was really wishing he were an earthworm at this very moment.

Well. I didn't mean to offend you... but you ARE different. You don't show off like the other boys. You don't run after attention. You are not loud or rude. You're different. Listen, it's not a bad thing. I mean... umm... it's a good thing.

Um thanks. *MAMA PLEASE HELP. I don't know what to say. Trees. I want to be with the trees. I want to hug a tree. I want to*

hug her too.

I think you're special too. I mean you are different.

Martina put her eyes down looking to the ground sensing his discomfort. The reality was that Martina's heart was in her throat too.

So... What are you doing this weekend?

Umm... I am... um... going to church.

Church? Cool.

What are you doing this weekend?

Nothing. I mean I have a gymnastics practice on Saturday. But that's it.

English class started. And so did something else... a something else that would last a long long time. Elijah heard nothing of that English class. Neither did Martina. Both were surprised at how they were feeling. The bell rang. Chairs were being pushed in. Backpacks filled. Papers sorted. Pencil cases stuffed. Elijah as though in a trance looked over to Martina and said:

It was great talking to you. I mean thanks for talking to me. I mean... I mean... I hope you don't get hurt in gymnastics.

They both exploded in laughter. And well, that sealed the deal. Elijah and Martina never looked at each other the same way.

That night when his parents noticed that he didn't run to his room or to the forest or to his books, they knew something was wrong.

Elijah. How was your day at school?

It was amazing. The most amazing day of my life. Martina actually spoke to me and I didn't faint. She said that I was different... in a good way. She sat next to me... on purpose. It was absolutely amazing. I don't even know what to do? What am I going to wear tomorrow.

That is what he said on the inside. He smiled and grunted: fine.

That's it— fine? Sally was not convinced. Something was changing about her Elijah. She could feel it like only a mother could feel it. Something was off.

I hope no one upset him today. I hope he is not in some sort of trouble. I know. I am sure that his friend Joshua told him something that upset him. I keep telling him not to trust his school friends. They are nothing like his friends at church. At least we know the families of the kids from church. But who knows what these kids are learning from their homes. I wonder if they are already introduced to drugs at this age. I need to call Abouna. I am worried about Elijah.

She went on and on in her head. By the time she looked up she saw that Elijah was off in the forest. She could have sworn that it looked like he was skipping. She squinted. Her heart stopped. Realization. Enlightenment.

It had to be. There is no other option. It must be... a... a... girl. Yalahwy. George can never find out that Elijah likes a girl. Oh no... who are her parents. Does she believe in God? Will she be baptized.

Then all of sudden she stopped. And she burst out laughing. Elijah was in grade seven. That's it. He was eleven years old. She had spiraled out of control like so many moms do when they feel like their little ones were in danger. And the relief she felt when she realized that her boy was beginning to have feelings for a girl and that he wasn't in fact in a drug ring at the school because of his friend Joshua— her relief was mostly in this one thought.

Thank you Jesus. I thought he was going to be monk with the way he has been behaving since his childhood. Thank God he is going to be normal.

Heaven was actually quite unsure how to respond.

+ + +

The following days were like a dream for Elijah. They spent every every English class next to each other. They would talk before class started. From the outside, it looked like no one else existed but Elijah and Martina. To them, these moments had a different quality. They were transported away— they somehow were able to break through the continuum of time and space. They asked each other tonnes of questions. Martina wanted to understand him. Elijah wanted to hug her. It was overwhelming for the both of them. She was fascinated by his unique way of seeing the world. He wanted to hug her.

What's your favorite food?

Grape leaves stuffed with rice and ground beef. How about you?

You eat grape leaves? Um... I love cereal.

Me too! What's your favorite movie?

E.T. My dad took us to the theater. It was awesome!

Me too! I loved E.T. My parents don't usually let me watch any movies, but this one they were OK with. What is your favorite hobby?

Definitely listening to music.

ME TOO!!!

{Me too... Such a simple statement. But it is pregnant with a terrible danger. For in the moment, there is within the human soul such a hunger for belonging that one can begin little by little to shed who they are in order to extend the feeling of fellowship. It's as though a new law is at work in the human soul— a second law. One that is ever so slightly away from one's true self. And so, young innocent Elijah found himself at this crossroad over and over these days. Every inauthentic "me too" was like a single leaf falling from his foliage. Trees seldom consider the first winds of early September to be of

any threat to them, when that first leaf begins to fall. But as time goes by, and it always does, one can hardly recognize the tree by end of October. The wind of “me too” in all its varying strength and directions was blowing on Elijah. He had no clue what hit him.}

Well, with so much agreeing, Elijah and Martina became bosom buddies, soul mates, best friends. They would sit at lunch and talk the whole time. Completely oblivious to all the social rules they were breaking— they shared everything. Two peas in a pod.

Elijah’s mind became so preoccupied with Martina that he began to forget the forest he carried with him in his heart. At church, he would light a candle in front of the icon of the Theotokos, bow his head and say *Mama pray for me*. He definitely couldn’t look at her in the eyes. If he did, he would see the eyes of a Mother who knows her child is slowly losing himself. But he didn’t look at her.

Something very strange happened in this season of Elijah’s life. He became a lot more religious. Sadly, to a Coptic person this may sound like good news. This was of course natural. As the secular life begins so must the religious life enter— for they really are two trees with the same roots. He was now concerned about arriving to church before the Absolution of the servants. He never ate olives after communion and he always, always, took his shoes off for communion. Holy ground and all. He wanted to make sure that he was a good boy so that God would protect his friendship with Martina.

Elijah stopped noticing *Uncle Onsi* at church... it’s like he couldn’t see him anymore.

Joshua

Elijah and Martina continued to be exclusively best friends throughout the middle school years. It was like there was an impenetrable wall around them. No one could come in between them. No one could get their attention. In their deep self absorption with each other, each found no need for anyone else's approval nor any one else's attention. Bliss. There definitely was something really special about their bond. It was definitely not purely platonic— that was for sure — nor was it purely romantic. They had found this really neat 80-20 balance in their lives... of course 80% being platonic. But that 20 percent was causing such a tension in Elijah. His heart was torn and a deep confusion was settling in to his heart. He lived a dual life— he had to hide everything from his parents and from everyone at church.

Elijah. Why is it that you never invite me over to your house.

Are you kidding? My dad would kill me for even talking to a girl. The only girl they are OK with me talking to is St Mary... he burst out laughing. But there was a sharp sting in his heart. *I loved talking with you my sweet Elijah.* His heart dropped. *Mama, I am sorry...*

Elijah. Are you OK? I lost you for few seconds there...

Ya. I'm fine. It's nothing.

Well... I don't understand why they wouldn't be happy for you.

Are you kidding. Happy? I can't even talk to you on the phone. I tried once. And then my dad stood over me... remember I hung up in mid sentence? His eyes bulged out of their sockets and hung up the phone. That's right. He hung up with his eye balls.

They burst out laughing.

No he didn't my sweet Elijah.

+ + +

They spent the summer of their grade nine year meeting up secretly in the park near his place. Elijah of course had to lie to his parents.

I'm going to play basketball at the park.

OK *Habibi*! Who are you going to play with?

I'm not sure. I'll go see who's there.

OK. Be home for 4 PM before your dad comes home.

OK mom!

Although it was summer, his spirit felt like it was fall. *I'm not that bad. It's not like I'm killing anyone. It's just a little lie.* Elijah would tell himself. Of course, if he was honest with himself, he knew that he was changing. He knew things were not the way they were. But, he simply brushed it off as growing up. *I'm not a kid anymore.*

My sweet Elijah, I wish you were.

Mama's voice in his heart was now a faint whisper. Almost inaudible.

The routine was simple. He would dial her number and hang up. And then he would call a second time and hang up again. Two missed calls meant meet me at the park. He would love to push her on the swings. It was often in these moments that Martina felt the most free to ask and say anything that came to mind. The rhythmic swing almost put her in a state of complete abandon. Speaking to someone without looking

them in the eyes made her feel like she could talk about absolutely anything.

Elijah. Who is your closest friend?

You. You know that.

Yeah. I just like hearing it. What do you imagine your future to be like?

I don't know. When I was younger, I always wanted to be a shepherd, in Ireland. I used to imagine rolling fields surrounded by beautiful forests. As you know, I love forests. I used to dream of the solitude... I know that is weird right?

Elijah. You are so weird. But I love it!

I mean. I don't think I'll ever be a shepherd. I have no clue what my future will be like. My dad always told me that life was about getting as much as you can and becoming as powerful as you can. I mean, being a shepherd is not practical at all... How do you imagine your future to be like?

I don't know. I just hope it is with you.

He stopped the swing and hugged her from behind. He had never done this before. He became stiff. She didn't push him away. He kissed the side of her neck. She closed her eyes. He felt the entire world was somehow magically between his two arms. He became less stiff. He relaxed. He just held her. Time froze.

The last few leaves of his innocence that were hanging on for dear life were slowly breaking free. You know it's fall when the leaves change their colours. And you know it's the end of fall when you find yourself completely naked... leaves strewn everywhere on the floor.

+ + +

Grade ten started and Elijah and Martina had no classes together. Elijah was devastated. But he did recognize Joshua

from his elementary school. He happened to be in three out of his four classes. Joshua remembered Elijah.

Hey! How's it going?

Great. Good to see you. Love your leather jacket. It's so cool!

Thanks. It's Elijah right.

Yeah. Joshua? (Elijah pretended that he wasn't sure.)

Yeah. What you doing tonight? Wanna hangout?

Tonight? Um. I usually um....I am busy.

Oh yeah! Please tell me you aren't still going to church every weekend.

No no... um. I'll check with my parents. They needed me for something. I'll check with them and get back to you.

Elijah had no hope. Some things would never change. Friday nights were hymns class at church. Saturday night Vespers and Sunday morning Liturgy. Strangely, even though he was now a deacon in the church and knew everything about the hymns and the Liturgy, he felt bored at church. It was a matter of necessity. He had no choice actually. He often would ask himself why he wasn't like all the other kids. *Why can't I be normal and be free on weekends.* Something about Joshua's swagger attracted Elijah. He was cool.

+ + +

WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO MISS FRIDAY NIGHT HYMNS CLASS???? THIS IS NOT WHO WE ARE!!!! SALLYYYYY!!!! COME! YOUR SON WANTS TO MISS FRIDAY NIGHT AT CHURCH SO HE CAN GO DOWNTOWN WITH HIS FRIENDS. You talk to him! I can't.

+ + +

And so began Elijah's second deep silence. This time it was a deep silence of the heart. He no longer could hear Mama's

voice or any other voice for that matter. He had entered into winter. When he was younger, he had once felt bad for Joshua, because he wondered how he lived without speaking to God or to St Mary. And now, Elijah was completely severed from his own heart. He spoke to neither. Nor did he want to.

Exile. Two flaming swords waved ceaselessly. Banned access from the tree of life. This Joshua, like Joshua of old, somehow broke down the walls... this time it was of little Elijah's heart. Elijah wanted to be normal. No. He wanted to be cool.

Martina, Joshua and Elijah were now the new trio. They together plotted how they could liberate Elijah from the tyranny of his parents and his God. This they did because they cared for Elijah... of course.

Oh my sweet Elijah.

Elijah heard nothing.

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Judges

Elijah's high school years were tempestuous. Because George, Elijah's dad, forced him to go to church all weekend, Elijah absolutely hated church. God had become the great limiter of his life. The chief enemy to his fun. Elijah wanted to be master of his own destiny... captain of his own ship. One thing that no one ever told the youth of the early 90s is that life always has limitations. Do what thou wilt is the sum of the teenage modern mind. It's also the main maxim of modern occult religion. Going to church was not what Elijah wilt.

Hair growing long. Every *tante* and *uncle* of course reminded him of this. George would make Elijah cut his hair prematurely. *What does hair have to do with God? So typical. They have made their God in their image. Be good now so you don't burn in Hell. Because they are such professional judges, they have made their God the great judge who will throw me and all my friends into Hell. Ooh please sign me up! Not only do I have to endure this Hell weekly, their God is going to keep me there eternally... Wow. I just said their God. Yeah. If You are around, I don't feel You. SO in the meantime, I am going to stick to reality. My friends and I are perfectly happy without your rules.*

Elijah would loop through this narrative in his mind endlessly at church. It got to the point that this thought turned into a specific shape in his head. All he had to do was mentally look up to the right, and this shadow of thoughts looming over him would express itself in a moment. All the

feelings of resentment and frustration ensued and flowed quickly into his heart.

Elijah, *Habibi*, come and dress as a deacon.

Elijah, stand up it is the Gospel.

Elijah, can you serve in the altar.

He wanted to say no, but he could see his mom watching him like a hawk. He always felt like such a disappointment in her eyes. Sally wasn't angry with him like George was. No. Disappointment, in Elijah's eyes, was a much more violent feeling. She never failed to remind him.

Habibi, you're not going to church dressed like that?

Habibi, what were you doing during the sermon? Oh? You went to the washroom? For forty five minutes? Do you think that is appropriate?

Habibi, what were you and Mena laughing about? Do you think it's appropriate to be laughing during communion?

Judges. He felt completely surrounded by judges. Of course there was *Uncle Onsi*, and his unexplainable post communion euphoria. *Man! He is such a nice guy. But is he ever deluded.*

Hi Elijah. I am so happy to see you.

Hi *Uncle*!

Elijah, I wanted to talk to you about something.

Sure *Uncle*. *How is it that he is always so smiley? Honestly what is so good about his life.*

Elijah, I wanted to tell you something that you might not understand right now. I am going to be leaving for Egypt in a few weeks.

WHAT? *No! You can't do that.* Is everything OK *Uncle*?

Everything is fine. Actually, it is more than fine. I haven't told anyone at church this, but I will be going to *Anba Bola's* monastery. I am seeking to become a monk.

Wow! That's amazing. I am so... happy for you? But why are you telling me this? Why me.

Uncle Onsi chuckled in the most peaceful way. *Habibi*, he said, I know you feel so lost at Church. I know that you see all the people around you as fake and that they are all judging you. Remember that you shouldn't do as they are doing. You should also be careful not to judge anyone. But I am only telling you because you belong to heaven. You are not the only one who used to talk to Mama. She loves you very much. And so does *Mar Mena*. You may have forgotten him, but he hasn't forgotten you or left you.

Elijah's head was spinning. *YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I HAVE DONE!!!! You don't know me. I am not that innocent kid who used to hug trees and stand for long times in front of the candles.*

Me Uncle? Me? Are you sure?

Uncle Onsi smiled even larger. Next to either side of his eyes, were the deepest smile wrinkles. Even when he wasn't officially smiling, his eyes looked like they were.

Of course I am sure, *Habibi*. Heaven is waiting for you. You will one day be one of us. Don't forget my words. You will be one of us.

Uncle Onsi hugged him. And though Elijah's heart was in the dead of winter, there sometimes shows up a warm breeze and a sun that is just a little warmer. Oh what that breeze does to a soul stuck in the January blues. Spring may actually come this year.

That evening, Elijah told his parents that he was going to study at Joshua's house. He called Joshua from the downstairs phone— cell phones still didn't exist at this point. Joshua answered the phone. Elijah whispered.

Hey. I am in.

In for what. What are you talking about?

I'm in. I'm ready to try it.

What? Did you just say you're ready to try it?

Yes.

What happened? You've been saying no for two years now!
Faith crisis?

Just shut up. Tell me where to meet you.

OK. I am in! Wow. Um... meet me at the park by your place.

+ + +

Elijah held the empty water bottle with a hole in its side. The cigarette had a little piece of black substance on its tip. Joshua lit it up. Placed the cigarette into the bottle. Both watched as the bottle filled up with smoke.

You ready? Empty your lungs. Breathe in the smoke and hold it in for as long as you can.

All he remembered was Curt Cobain's slurring voice singing in the background... Smells Like Teen Spirit.

*With the lights out, it's less dangerous
Here we are now, entertain us
I feel stupid and contagious
Here we are now, entertain us
A mulatto, an albino, a mosquito, my libido
Yeah, hey
I'm worse at what I do best
And for this gift I feel blessed
Our little group has always been
And always will until the end
Hello, hello, hello, how low
Hello, hello, hello, how low
Hello, hello, hello, how low
Hello, hello, hello
With the lights out, it's less dangerous
Here we are now, entertain us
I feel stupid and contagious*

Here we are now...

Ironically, the band's name was Nirvana.

+ + +

That night as Elijah was stumbling home, walking next to his bike, he saw a car with something on its roof top, he sobered up quickly thinking it was a cop. Adrenaline was pumping through his veins. But what happened next, was almost worse than the cops. A taxi car pulled up right next to Elijah.

Elijah, called out *Uncle Onsi*. The crease lines in his eyes as pronounced as always. Don't spend too much time running. Remember. You are one of us. Heaven is waiting.

Uncle Onsi didn't wait for his response. Left alone under a street light. Completely alone. Elijah didn't know what to do with himself. So he took the next step into a future that seemed far greater than himself. *Just get yourself to bed*. Then Cobain's voice eased things...

With the lights out, it's less dangerous

Here we are now, entertain us...

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Ruth

Martina was not happy. She only heard about Joshua and Elijah's night at the park after two weeks. During those two weeks she could feel that something was off. You see lies have been around for thousands of years. Actually, they *haven't* been around in the existential sense. Just as darkness is the absence of light, so lies are the absence of truth... and how great is that darkness when the narrative you present to those closest to you is not the truth. Lies had promised Elijah that he would be able to save Martina the pain of her disappointment in him— they never told him that he would be eroding on the inside. He couldn't keep eye contact with her for more than a few seconds.

The issue Josh, is that I don't want to stop. She would kill me if she found out. And to be honest, I just love it.

What she doesn't know won't hurt her. Besides, it's not like you are doing cocaine or anything crazy like that.

Yeah, but I haven't hidden anything from her since grade seven. It's grade 13! She knows me as well as I know myself.

This was the conversation that kept Elijah from telling Martina.

Elijah discovered that smoking up meant that he was lying to so many more people than just Martina. He was lying to his parents. He was lying to his teachers. He was lying to his friends. He was lying to everyone. Although, he didn't know what to do with God at this point in his life, he somehow intuitively knew that there was no lying to God. But he

definitely could lie to himself. And so he did. This seems to be a really strong pattern observable in many humans. No. Most humans.

Martina... it was only once! I really wanted to try it out! (He in fact had been smoking up every day)

...

Please. Your silence is killing me. Say something.

It's not *just* that you did something that you KNEW would upset me, it's that you never told me. I had to find out from Josh. Had he not slipped up, how long were you planning on going without telling me. I just don't know right now. I just don't know.

Martina's heart was in so much pain. She wanted to yell—*Elijah, don't you get it... I fell in love with you because you were different. You weren't like the other boys. Now... you are no different.*

That night Martina wept. The thing that she didn't realize, is that tears turn to ice in the winter. She thought to herself—*two weeks ago I was completely in love with Elijah. Six years! Six years of spring! And now, in two short weeks, summer, fall and winter...* Martina cried and cried and when she could cry no more... she cried again. Then, she really was done crying. No more tears flowed. However the heart can continue crying for what feels like forever. The tears of the heart are a lot more rational than the weak analytical logic of the brain. Though Martina had never believed in God or spoken to Him before, her heart knew better. And this supra-rational tear came out of her heart: *Oh God... please take care of Elijah.*

I AM.

+ + +

Martina fell asleep. She slept well. She dreamt of a man who had the face of a young child. In her dream, she felt like that must have been what Elijah looked like when he was a small

boy. Yet his hair was white. His eyes a mixture of complete innocence and deep knowing. His face shone brighter than the sun. She felt warm.

+ + +

Pot was beginning to take up more and more real estate in Elijah's mind. His life narrative began to change. Lying to himself was proving to be far more destructive to his soul than he could have ever imagined. He began to push more and more people out as his addiction to *fun* began to settle in to his heart— like a friend who was coming to spend the weekend at your place, but then ends up staying for six months. Actually, this friend's main function was to help Elijah forget the pain he was feeling in his heart.

How could you lie to me Elijah? Martina's voice echoed in his mind.

You are one of us. Heaven is waiting. This time it was Uncle Onsi's voice.

Habibi, there is something wrong with you these days. I am worried about you. This time it was his mother's voice.

And so, he would run to his friend and disappear... at least for a time.

+ + +

Martina hated who he was becoming, but she couldn't bring herself to leave him... yet. They spent more and more time bickering and fighting over things. It was evident to both of them that they were drifting apart, but they also didn't know how to be without each other. And so, they just kept hurting each other.

Do you really have to be listening to your music all the time? It's changing you.

Elijah turned off his yellow Walkman and looked at her not believing what he had just heard come out of her mouth.

Can you stop acting like my mom? Honestly! Maybe I am listening to my music all the time for a reason. Maybe you should take the hint.

He instantly regretted saying that. It was too late. He had said it.

Martina, tried not to show that she was hurt. Her go-to cover up emotion is anger. So she glared at him and stomped away. Her heart was broken.

This continued for several months.

They would take breaks from each other and then come back together. The truth is that Elijah was torn. He loved her so deeply. She represented something that was pure and holy in his mind. Sacred. But he had exiled himself from that world. Even though Martina was not a believer— she somehow lived like she was. She was still innocent. This broke his heart.

I am the problem. His heart broke further as he realized that he didn't deserve her. Guilt and shame have a way of always isolating a person. Every time he would come back to her, he would promise her that he would do everything he could to stop smoking up. The reality was that he had been able to reduce it to once or twice a week. One time, he was even able to stop for a month. But there was a much deeper issue inside him. His heart had become cold. He had lost his innocence. He was no longer the Elijah that she knew. And that tormented him. But he could do nothing about it.

Elijah asked Martina to go to prom.

She said yes.

Elijah got drunk at his after grad party.

It was a bush party.

The police came and ended the fun early.

Martina hated every second of it.

Elijah knew that it was over.

The next day, on a long walk, they remembered every moment from that first grade seven class. The swing. The lunch time walks. Their secret meetings at the park. They both laughed. They both cried.

They hugged.

He kissed her on her forehead.

Bye. He whispered. Pushing through his tears. I love you.

Bye. She mouthed.

She turned away.

Inside he knew.

Inside she knew.

They would never see each other again.

On earth.

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1 Samuel

Elijah spent the following summer getting ready to move away for university. Both his parents were devastated at the idea of their only boy living on his own in a big city. How was he going to survive? Elijah, on the other hand couldn't wait. The last few years were really rocky at home. He often felt his home was like a prison. His mom was so critical. His dad was so angry— but only when he was around. He couldn't wait to get out. Elijah did everything he needed to just survive at home. The bare minimum. Outwardly, he endured his parents, inwardly he was ready to start a new life. The emptiness he felt in not seeing or talking to Martina made it all worse.

Just make it to September. Just make it to September. Just make it to September. Then.

F-R-E-E-D-O-M! Two summers later, he would watch Braveheart. In the last scene, Mel Gibson was being tortured and in the most dramatic way he cries out...

F-F-F-R-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-D-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-M!

The whole movie theater was sobbing. People were sniffing everywhere around him. He was the only one who was laughing his head off. And the more the people around him looked at him like he was a heartless monster—the more Elijah laughed! What they didn't know, was that he was remembering his last summer before university, where he was dreaming of just that... his freedom. He could relate to Mel. He saw in his parents the big guys in the movie with all

the instruments of torture. The more the analogy grew in his mind the more he laughed. He was howling by the time the credits were rolling. He wished that the movie had come out two years prior. For now, he just kept telling himself— *just make it to September.*

George could not forgive his son for NOT doing the ONLY logical thing any intelligent human being who had any sort of brains would do. *How can he choose English Literature in a far away city when he was accepted in Engineering here. He could have had an easy life. Why? Why would he do that?*

Something must be said here as an aside. For it is important that one properly hear that last sentence in George's head— said the way George said it. It changes everything. "Why would he do that?" was pronounced in his head as "Eh-waii he do zaat?" For some reason, in an Egyptian person's mind the "h" in "why" needed to be emphasized. And clearly, there was no way to say it after the "w", so it turned into "Eh-waii". The stronger one felt about his question the more he would slow down the first part. When George was thinking about this specific topic, he would sometimes stutter at the first eh. *Eh-eh-eh-waii?*

What will he do with an English Literature degree? Eh-waii Lord? Engineering— that is respectable. I will be able to show my face at church. But now... eh-watt will I say? He is learning English?

Elijah knew exactly what his dad thought about his life choices. His mom on the other hand, would not have been happy with either one of the career choices that he had applied to.

I always saw you as a Doctor. I mean, we came all the way to Canada from Egypt, so you can have a good life. We gave up everything. Our families, our friends, our way of life... for what? So you can study English? Your whole life I was waiting for the day I would call you Doctor Elijah.

Sorry to be such a disappointment to you Mom.

No, no *Habibi*. Don't say that. You just should have applied to Sciences so you can get into Med school.

These small interactions with his parents were torturous — and their way of thinking was the instrument of torture. That is why he laughed so hard in the theater.

+ + +

Toronto. The first day of his new life. He was ready. He now, finally enthroned himself as king Elijah, king of his life. No one could stand in his way. He could finally do *ANYTHING* he wanted. Now Elijah himself didn't know that this enthronement happened. He never called himself King Elijah of course... how preposterous and arrogant would that be! How self-centered!

For as long as people lived in community, they have always wanted a ruler over them— even God didn't think it a good idea— because he knew the suffering that came along with kings and their rule. But for the people of modernity, the thought of subjection to another was offensive. Unwittingly, the prevailing thought and movement of the time was that each one should be king over their own lives. For Elijah, nothing could be more... AWESOME!

Of course, it didn't take long for him to discover that being a king without subjects can be quite lonely. He arrived to Toronto a whole week before class started. He moved into his one bedroom residence at Trinity College at the University of Toronto. He spent the first couple of hours unpacking. Once his room was setup all he needed to do was embark on his journey of subduing people to become his subjects. This all sounds so medieval, but this is exactly what the ego does in order to fill the desert-like landscape of its sinful host. On the one hand the ego seeks to step on others to lift itself up, and on the other hand the ego seeks those around it to fall down

before its image in worship. These thoughts never crossed Elijah's conscious mind, but they were the driving force of his subconscious being.

Trinity College, with its majestic stone buildings, was the perfect setting for this conquest. The culture of the College was so highly academic and studious. This would become the fertile ground for Elijah's academic hubris. It was in these halls that he would question the very philosophical underpinnings of his existence. It was in these halls that he would fill his mind with knowledge, philosophy, poetry and secular thought. It was in these great halls that the new Elijah was being born. Elijah the scholar.

Elijah's mind would become a dangerous weapon. His mind was now completely disconnected from his heart. It remained mostly in the confines of his brain over the following years. There, he felt safe, predictable, analytical... no need of those crazy superstitions.

+ + +

In his first semester he devoted himself to his studies like never before. He was going out of his way to build himself up. He loved to go to the Junior Common room at Trinity college, and there debate with whomever he found about the meaning of some poem or on the political status of some remote village in South America.

Knowledge was his new drug of choice. And expounding his opinion was the high.

Humans aren't very creative. They medicate their hurts with the very things that wounded their nature in the

beginning— which then leaves them in a worse state than before.

+ + +

Elijah genuinely loved his studies. He quickly took to John Keates and his poetry. He especially loved the Ode to Psyche. It made him feel sophisticated and deep. So he memorized parts of it as he walked up and down the hallways of Trinity College.

*Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind ...*

Elijah's favorite tradition was the Wednesday night high table dinners, where the students and the staff came to dinner in their gowns. It was so formal. Prestigious. Here, he could break out in poetry and it wouldn't sound strange. Nay. It would ring quite fitting.

Bravo Elijah. Bravo! It's as though John Keats himself was among us!

I thank you professor. This particular piece, written in 1819, speaks to me of the infinite possibilities of the creative mind. The mind— a god unto itself really.

And so a new liturgy was being celebrated— vestments and all.

2 Samuel

Third Sunday of second semester of the blessed year 1994, Elijah woke up to a memory of a conversation he would often have with his father.

Elijah! Did you pray with the Agpeya?

No Baba. Not this morning.

Habibi! I am surprised you haven't been hit by a bus yet? Who will protect you? You need to pray every morning so nothing bad happens to you.

Somehow this memory made him miss going to church. He realized that he hadn't gone to Liturgy once since his move. His dad had contacted a few *Abounas* to make sure his son would continue to be a deacon and attend regularly. George was so completely oblivious to his son's inner life... he always was.

So Elijah, decided to make his way to a church that was one subway and two buses away in the suburbs of Toronto. This church was "the church" to be at. Rumor had it that it had the prettiest girls. That was enough to make the long trek in the cold of February worth it. Of course, Elijah didn't wear a toque, I mean after spending twenty minutes on his hair, each strand and clump perfectly positioned, a toque would be disastrous.

Martina!

His heart fell. He was completely alone, sitting on a subway that was filled with people.

I never did my hair for Martina. I miss you. I really messed up with you. I didn't deserve you. For the first time since the end of June had Elijah allowed himself to FEEL anything in his heart. He shifted in his chair, straightened his shoulders and now spoke with his mind. *Elijah. Be rational. Martina could never have kept up with you. She was never as intellectual as you. You were little kids. Sure it was nice, but not practical. You don't need a girl who will hug trees with you. You need a woman who can keep up with you.*

And so Elijah, made his way to church, sat at the back seat and tried to get the best angle to check out the girls. Elijah noticed something about himself that he never used to do. Any time he entered into a room he would rank the girls from best looking to the least attractive. And then, he would treat them based on their ranking. This of course, applied to university as well as church.

In fact, Elijah loved to rank people in general. He liked to keep things organized in his mind. He even had names for the different kinds of people at church. Although he didn't know their names, he would chuckle in his mind and name them: deacon Daniel, pious Peter, fake Fred, foby Filibbos, Coptic Nazi, make-up Mary, heartburn *Uncle*. The church was filled with heartburn *uncles*. It always drove him mad when he would see people in the church tap their chest in what he saw as fake humility.

Go ahead.

No you go ahead.

Please I insist, you go first.

And each *uncle* would tap his chest in pious humility. It drove Elijah nuts. And yet instinctually in communion line he found himself tapping his chest! *I've been programmed!*

Elijah was approached by a few people that Sunday. They all asked his name. They all asked him what he was studying.

English.

Oh. English? OK... OK. Like, the English language?

Yes. The English language.

Oh... OK. Was that your first choice?

Yes. I chose to study English. On purpose.

OK. OK. Good for you.

Elijah chuckled inwardly as he saw himself far more sophisticated than these one track mind engineers and doctors. He could think for himself. He was a scholar.

And then it happened. He saw her. *I need to find out that girl's name.*

+ + +

It took the next several weeks for Elijah to befriend the friend of the friend of “that” girl. He found out that she was dating another guy. But he wasn’t worried. He would find a way in. Her name was Mary. *Of course*— he thought to himself. Every girl is some form of Mary. Mariam. Myriam. Maria. Marian. Marianne. He was happy that she had the simplest form— just Mary. He discovered that she was in second year at U of T studying political sciences. Church became exciting again. When Elijah was young, he loved church because of another Mary. Of course he had blocked that part of his memory out of his mind. But there was some sort of comfort that her name was Mary... he just didn’t know why.

+ + +

Elijah found a way to time his arrival at church to be right before communion. At the very end. That way, he can sleep in a little, take his time making himself look good and enjoy the best part— socializing with Mary. Little by little, Elijah found a way to wedge himself between Mary and her boyfriend. In fact, her boyfriend had no chance, Elijah was more charming, more intelligent and way cooler. Within a month, Mary had

broken up with Uriah and started dating Elijah. Elijah liked how that worked out.

+ + +

Every once in a while, Elijah would find himself feeling guilty for arriving to church so late. At times he would find himself wishing that God was real.

I AM.

But believing in You would mean so many things in my life would have to change. Not interested. Maybe later. Besides, why are You such a buzzkill? Why is everything wrong in your eyes? Like, why can't I live my life the way I want to? Why ALL this time singing to You? Do You speak Coptic? So why do we have to? Why is it the same message every week— I get it, I am bad You are good and I need to change. Man, why do things have to be like this. Besides, I look at the people all around me at church. They really are no different than anyone outside of the church. And their heartburn chest tapping turns into yelling and honking if anyone were to cut them off on the road... just like anyone else. To be honest, I hope You don't mind, but can I be honest for a moment? Why would You create us so we can live a life playing hide and seek? If You are around, why can't You just show Yourself. What am I doing? Why bother, You aren't going to answer anyways. Sometimes, I wish You were real, because it would sure help to have someone in my life who loved me the way I am. But all I am hearing Your representatives saying, is that You don't like anything about me. Yes. Yes. You died for me and all that jazz. You probably died for pious Peter or deacon Daniel and maybe even for heartburn uncles... but I am sure not for me. I AM a pot-smoking, adulterous, academic, a student of life who has lost interest in petty superstitions. Why does it feel like I am breaking up with You. I am going crazy. What do they put in that incense... I am now talking to myself and think I am breaking up with a God I don't believe in. Wow. I need to spend more time

with people. I mean, one good thing came out of coming to church — Mary. She's cool. She comes to church because her parents still make her. She seems nice. Oh... and one more thing... If You do exist, can you please keep an eye on Martina... I think I really messed up and I really miss her. Please take care of her.

I AM.

+ + +

And so Elijah broke up with his God just as he had with Martina. He would regret it just as he had with Martina. He felt somehow liberated and at the same time completely disoriented. He still knew his North from his South. But he could no longer figure out which way was West and which way was Truth. From this point on, he only would connect with Mary at campus. And would they ever connect! She too had lost her orientation.

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1 Kings

Elijah loved meeting up with Mary especially after Monday's philosophy class. He would share with her all the things they were discussing. They sat under their favorite great oak tree in front of Trinity college. Spring was here and their microcosm was beginning to bud with life. Mary loved how deep Elijah was. She enjoyed seeing his eyebrows crunch up as he focused on finding the right words. Elijah had been growing his hair since he first moved to Toronto— it added to his free spirited demeanor.

Cogito ergo sum. Latin for “I think therefore I am”. Descartes. He was a philosopher in the sixteenth or seventeenth century... not sure which one... anyways, this simple line completely blew my mind.

I think therefore I am? I've heard that before somewhere — Mary said to show interest.

It's so... deep. So this guy, Descartes, actually tried to suspend his belief in everything. He decided that he would even doubt his own existence. Isn't that crazy! But he did it. He was not only trying to prove the existence of God but his own existence. And that is when he came up with *cogito ergo sum*. I love it! The human mind! That is all we have! That's how we know things and know that we ourselves are alive... Do you ever just sit there think about existence?

Yes. It's so bizarre. I mean, I haven't thought about it as deeply as you have. Tell me more.

Elijah found himself loving the fact that he now had a captive audience, a fan club that was willing to listen to his musings. He continued.

I think therefore I am. For too long people have depended on their outside circumstances in order to define themselves. Humans have depended on others in society to give shape to their narrative. *Cogito ergo sum*— it sets me free to define myself and the world around me based on my own definitions and experiences. We are free! Life is a blank slate. There is no meta narrative!

Mary would listen to Elijah talk philosophy for hours. She sincerely enjoyed his brilliant mind. This time together shaped their bohemian view of themselves and the world. They felt free to think and do whatever they wanted. Mary, herself had gone through a lot at home that made her want to be free from her family. Her time with Elijah was always an escape from the arguments and fights at home. She never remembered a time when both her mom and dad weren't fighting. She distinctly remembers being eleven and thinking to herself— *This is all my fault. If mom and dad are fighting it's because of me.* She carried this guilt all the way up to grade twelve. The guilt then turned into anger as both of her parents were trying to manipulate her into taking their sides. Instead, Mary took advantage of the situation and found herself pinning them against each other so she could get more and more freedom. They now have no control over her... at all. Although this is exactly the outcome she wanted, at times she found herself falling back into a place of guilt. The only thing that they had both insisted on is that she needed to go to church on Sundays.

She loved being with Elijah. She felt that he taught her so much. She loved the freedom found in this simple saying that he shared with her— I think therefore I am. Of course, it meant something very different for her than it did for

Descartes. For her, it meant she was thinking for herself... she wasn't a slave to her parents' views and opinions and so she felt alive.

Little did Elijah know that this simple little phrase was so far removed from how his ancestors viewed themselves and the world. In fact, to a Coptic mind, the first premise to all philosophy is: God is. From this first absolute premise, flowed the rest of life. *Deus est ergo sum*. God is therefore I am. This changes everything. For, if God is the source of existence, then everything must follow the Logic that God has provided for all things that exist. Everything finds its purpose and identity in God. It is God who created, therefore the creature finds its *telos*— its end, its destination— in God. Elijah and Mary were no different. They too were created to find their purpose and identity in God. But Descartes had changed that for them. Now that they were the measure of all things, the only thing that mattered was how they “thought” about things. That was the truth.

Elijah was lost in thought. Mary remained quiet. She knew that he would eventually share. In those quiet moments, she would love to rest her head on his shoulder. He would put his arms around her. It didn't matter what anyone else thought... they were free.

+++

George and Sally only heard from Elijah once a week. Long distance calls were quite expensive. Elijah would go to the payphone in Trinity College and call his parents collect.

Hi Mr. George, you have received a collect call from Elijah, do you accept?

Sally! Sally! Pick up the other phone. Elijah is on the phone.

Sorry sir. Do you accept? Please answer yes or no.

Of course I accept. I accept.

Please answer yes or no. You can also press 1 to accept or hang up to say no.

Habibti I said I accept. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Thank you. Connecting your call.

Hi ya Jah Jah! Hi *Habibi*!

Hey Mom. Hey Dad.

We miss you *Habibi*! How is everything? How is school?

Good.

How is church?

Good.

Thank God. We were eating your favorite meal last night. Grape leaves. I made extra for you so you can put in your freezer. *Baba* and I can't wait for you to come back. O *Habibi* it is great to hear your voice.

Ya Sally. We are only hearing your voice. Give a chance for Elijah to speak! So. How are you Jah Jah.

Good.

...

Abouna is asking about you here. He says he misses you. He says hi.

Hi back.

Church is growing. Everyone here says hi. How is *Abouna* over there? Where do you attend? Are you a deacon every week like we agreed? Are you praying with your *Agpeya* every day? I mean, don't forget, you need God to help you with your studies. How else do you think you are doing so well every day. God is protecting you and keeping you safe from the bad people around you. And are you enjoying your classes? Which one is your favorite. I remember when I was in University I absolutely loved my Math classes. I was the champion in Math. Actually, I was also the champion in Ping Pong at my university. Are you playing any Ping Pong? I was actually number two champion in all of Egypt.

Ya George. You are not giving Elijah a chance to speak!

Ya Sally, I am sharing with him to inspire him. So Elijah, are you playing any Ping Pong?

No dad. I haven't found a Ping Pong table.

OK— you should go to the University student services and find out where they have tables. Sometimes you need to do other activities besides studying and going to church. Extra-curricular activities are necessary to keep your mind balanced and healthy. Ping Pong is great also for hand eye coordination.

Elijah was lost in thinking about how once again his parents had no idea who he really was. He remembered the day his dad brought home the Atari. *What a disaster. My poor parents— so simple! I bet they never learned about Descartes. I mean in Egypt, they are so narrow minded. Here, people are free thinkers. Mom and Dad, you have no idea who I am. I don't think you would like me right now. I know you wouldn't approve of Mary. You would think her a distraction. I love you guys— but I definitely don't know how I am going to survive a summer at home when I have tasted freedom here.*

Elijah? Elijah? Are you there?

Sorry dad. There is a lot of noise here. What did you just say?

I was asking you if you made any friends from church?

Yeah. Lots.

Good! Good! Be careful. The foreigners are not like us. You can be friends but not too close. OK. *Yalla Habibi*. Take care and we'll talk next week. Sally, *yalla* say bye.

Bye *Habibi*! We miss you!

Miss you too. K. Bye.

And so went the majority of the phone calls home. Sally's heart would light up at the first sound of his voice. Every time she hung up she would think of little Elijah. She would either remember him as a little silent baby or she would remember his beautiful humble demeanor as a child talking to the

animals in the forest. Every time she hung up, she cried. Where did time go? Where is my little Jah Jah now? And oh how her heart ached for those days.

Oh Mother of Light, please cover your little Elijah with your veil. This little prayer would slip out of Sally's heart almost hourly. She figured that St Mary would be the one to understand her own mother's heart the most.

I love your sweet Elijah.

+ + +

Elijah and Mary connected more and more often with each other. They were inseparable. Unlike Martina, Mary quite enjoyed smoking up on weekends with Elijah. When they went out on weekends, they would party. It's what all university students do. Elijah, enjoyed being with Mary but for him parties were a time for him to disengage from his well used mind. For Elijah, it was a time to let himself loose. Based on his mindless partying and following Descartes' simple logic of *cogito ergo sum*— Elijah didn't exist at parties. For now he did not live except in his flesh— there was no *cogito*.

Elijah and Mary's guardian angels both disliked weekend parties and after parties. They could not understand why humans would put themselves through such mindless suffering. Of course, Elijah and Mary didn't see it as suffering — on the contrary, they saw it as bliss.

+ + +

Philosophy. From the Greek *philo* and *sophia*. Literally the love of wisdom.

Elijah's guardian angel particularly did not understand why Elijah's professors called it philosophy class. He himself, having gazed on the face of Wisdom Himself, when bearing his daily account, called it *philautia* class.

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2 Kings

Philautia. The love of self. It just sounds so much better in Greek.

Philautia is a dead end. Elijah discovered these dead ends over and over in his life and therefore found himself needing to discover new ways to fill the ever growing void in his heart. He still loved partying and he still loved Mary. Now in third year, Mary was in her last year, he had this constant need for more. Something was lacking deeply in his life. He thought that all he needed to do was devote himself more seriously to his studies— he would discover that this never filled the void. Academia had him bowing at her altars as he emptied himself in his studies. Late night vigils, writing up essay after essay. Abstinence from food was a common requirement as he pushed through his academic labors. And though Elijah's mind was expanding with more and more knowledge, he found his existential angst grow within him. He had a hunger for something gnawing at him on the inside.

Mama smiled at her sweet Elijah. *You are hungry for my Son. Only He can fill you. Only He can satisfy you. He can place in you a fountain of everlasting life flowing from your heart quenching your need for anything else.* She covered him with her veil for a short moment just as Sally had been asking her in that very moment.

Elijah closed his eyes for a moment. It was as though a gentle breeze had just brushed up against his deepest inner

self. Inexpressible warmth tickled his heart. Something akin to peace. And then it was gone.

The thing that is clear is that heaven doesn't look upon those still in the flesh in the way one would imagine. For example, the Holy Spirit never left Elijah for one moment—not even while he was sinning. The fact of the matter is that, somehow, God supports, maintains and keeps in existence... well... everyone and everything. He makes His sun shine on the good and the evil. That is why, Mama had no problem covering Elijah with her veil, even though Elijah was entrenched in a life of self-love.

It would almost be easier to be far from God and to hate Him— and the heavenly ones— if they were just a little more spiteful and judgmental of us— but that couldn't be farther from the truth.

+ + +

Don't spend too much time running. Remember. You are one of us. Heaven is waiting. Elijah, for some strange reason, remembered Uncle Onsi's parting words to him. O Uncle Onsi. You have no idea how far that is from the truth... you have no idea.

+ + +

Third year was an intense year for Elijah. Three of his five courses were poetry classes. He found himself writing quite a bit of poetry himself. This type of introspection often led him to an inner anguish. A tension was developing in his inner person. He had no peace. He wanted peace. He remembered his childhood. He ached. He wrote.

seasons
consistently inconsistent

the death of one fallen tree
moss covered and forgotten
still carries within it the rings of it's story
its core bears a memory that can't be erased
summer and spring
winter and fall
each ring calling back to a time
when both robin and squirrel
had of this very tree made home and shelter
at the core of me
there are rings
a heart inconsistently consistent
crusted with an impenetrable bark
now moss covered
now covered by sleet
on the inside aching for spring
of a new me

This particular poem brought him back to his time as a child in the forest. A time when he had peace. A time of inner harmony. A time...he had left behind.

+ + +

Omri. A fellow third year English student who was in a lot of the same classes as Elijah. Elijah used to call him Om. *I am brilliant*, thought Elijah, *what a perfect name for my gentle friend from India... OM!*

Omri was indeed gentle and peaceful. Very peaceful. He was a devout follower Sri Sathya Sai Baba. In fact he would bring Sai Baba's picture with him to class. Omri would place it on the corner of his desk. Sai Baba, Elijah had learned, was a man who had claimed himself to be God. Elijah was fascinated by both Om and Sai Baba. He found it weird and exotic to think of a man, kind of like Jesus, who declared himself to be

God, but was still alive. He had millions of followers all around the world.

Omri was not shy to share his beliefs with Elijah. Elijah found it strange that he was so open to Om's religion having abandoned his own beliefs. Om would tell stories of how Sai Baba would materialize things out of nowhere... gold, flowers, candies and desserts. He taught that all religions were the same. Philosophically impossible, but much more acceptable than Christianity's claim to possess the sole absolute truth!

Why are you so calm?

Me? Calm? You should have seen me as a child. You can ask my mom about that.

Omri smiled and offered.

I am calm because Sai Baba makes me calm. I wake up every morning and devote myself to an hour of meditation. I sing to him and offer him worship.

Elijah was puzzled. An hour? If he prayed his *Agpeya* prayers for ten minutes he thought himself to be a saint.

So you are telling me you sit there for an hour meditating?

Yes, Elijah. I enter into a state of deep inner consciousness. I repeat a simple mantra. When I am done— I am calm and have inner peace.

Elijah was weary of religion in general. All religions. Although Om had invited Elijah several times to the Ashram, he always refused. He wanted deeply what Om had but didn't want anything to do with prayer or religion. He remained fascinated with his friend's devotion to Sai Baba. He did however accept to go to a Yoga studio with Om. Elijah thought that Yoga was innocent. Everyone did it. He, of course, did not know that every single position in Yoga was dedicated to a Hindu god— Om had forgotten to mention that to him. Elijah's guardian angel would think it strange that they called it a Yoga studio and not a Yoga temple. He would wait for him outside the temple.

Sai Baba, prayed Omri, please reveal yourself to Elijah and bring forth your deep consciousness upon him.

Sai Baba heard nothing. He couldn't. He was 12,529 km away.

+ + +

Mary also loved Yoga.

So peaceful. So relaxing. It's like a spa for your soul... right Elijah?

Yeah! I love it!

Namaste.

Namaste my love.

Thursday nights was devoted to their Yoga. Quite a bit of ritual had been put into their Thursdays. Elijah's classes ended at 4 PM and Mary had the whole afternoon off. So Mary would spend the afternoon preparing a special dinner for the two of them at her downtown apartment (the fighting at home had gotten so intense that she decided to divorce her parents and get her own place downtown). She would then meet Elijah at Trinity college at 4:15 PM so they could both walk down Hoskin Avenue to Sivananda Yoga Vedanta center. It was a nine minute walk. During that walk, both Elijah and Mary had purposed in their hearts to prepare themselves for their Yoga classes by walking in silence. They wanted to prepare their inner sanctuaries. Clear their mind. They were welcomed at the studio with a sign that read— No shoes in the studio, you are in a sacred space.

Hmm, thought Elijah after reading that sign for the first time, I guess Moses was into Yoga as well. Elijah often laughed at his own jokes.

Afterwards, Mary and Elijah would peacefully walk back to her place where they would have the romantic meal that Mary had prepared. Every once in a while, Elijah would surprise Mary by going to a Blockbuster in the morning to rent a

movie. They would cuddle together on a couch and watch the movie in each other's arms. In those moments, Elijah felt peace.

Peace.

In Elijah's mind, peace was when one found themselves in a state of perfect relaxation where no external conditions could get in the way of one's comforts. Elijah was wrong. This too was *philautia*— self-love.

+ + +

Friday mornings. Elijah almost always felt a little more anxious on Friday mornings. Whether he slept over at Mary's place or not... he always felt more anxious. This would be overcome with a good dose of weekend partying. That kind of peace never could last.

Life is good— Elijah lied to himself.

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1 Chronicles

Mary graduated that year from Poli-Sci. With honors. Elijah was used to going home for the summers. This year, he wanted to spend every moment he could with Mary. She was going to be moving to New York in September to do her law degree. Elijah was devastated at the thought that he would not be seeing her all the time. Nothing like he had over the last three years.

What about Thursday Yoga nights. Weekend parties with Mary. No. That's not OK!

So, Elijah decided to let his parents know that he wasn't going to be returning home for the summer. He surprised Mary with an all-inclusive trip to Costa Rica to celebrate her graduation. Elijah of course lied to his parents and told them that he will be working all summer in Toronto. George and Sally were upset.

What do you mean *Habibi*? We are not going to see you all summer? That is fine. I will send your mother down to spend a few weeks with you. Elijah, your mother will die if she doesn't see you.

What? No dad! She can't come!

Why not? Of course she can come. She can stay with her cousin *Tante* Lucy.

Dad, that will be a waste of time. I am thinking of taking a summer course as well. Do you want her to get in the way of my studies?

Of course not *Habibi*. I didn't realize. Of course not. No. No. Studies always come first. OK. I will come up with an excuse to not let your mom to go.

Elijah knew exactly what he needed to say in order to get what he wanted from his parents. He knew that ANYTHING that threatened his grades was blasphemous. And so, he was able to avoid his mom coming down to Toronto for a few weeks.

As for Mary, there was no way she could tell her parents that she would be travelling to Costa Rica with Elijah! So, she told them that she needed to go to New York to prepare for her move in the fall. Her parents, now with the divorce almost finalized, barely noticed the inconsistency in the dates that she had previously provided. In some way, her parents seemed relieved that Mary was out of the house. They didn't feel the need to hold on to their marriage anymore. *Philautia*. It's everywhere.

Elijah was so excited. Yes. Excited. And so the time was set. They would be going to Costa Rica in the second week of July. He had done everything. He had booked the all-inclusive hotel. He planned the day trips to all the romantic spots in Costa Rica. He found himself counting all the great things that he had accomplished in planning this trip of a lifetime. He, of course, only booked one room for the two of them. He was so excited. Yes. Excited.

+ + +

Travelling those days was so easy. *Nairouz* of 2001 would change that forever. But it was 1996... and travelling was so easy in 1996. Elijah prayed that he would see no other Egyptians at Pearson Airport. Mary met him on the other side of customs. They both made it to the gate. Elijah thought he was in the clear. He reached over to hold Mary's hand. It was the perfect moment to lean over and whisper something

about how excited he was to spend these coming two weeks with her. As he began his lean in, he immediately released Mary's hand and continued his momentum all the way to the floor— pretending that he dropped something.

Elijah!

Uncle Ibrahim! What are you doing here? I mean, why are you here? I mean... hi *Uncle*. How is *Tante Salwa*?

She is good, *Habibi*. Eh—where are you going? *Baba* will be so happy that I saw you.

O *Uncle*. I am... um... surprising him. He doesn't know that I am travelling. Please. I am going to get him a special gift for his birthday... from um... from Costa Rica. It is a special... um... type of... um... well it's a surprise. Please don't tell him.

Of course *Habibi*! I am so happy I saw you. I am on my way to Amreeca (that is how one says America) to visit my cousin Marco. Well, *Habibi*, be good! Enjoy Costa Rica. I hear there are lots of wild animals there.

OK. Safe travels *Uncle*. I'll watch out for the tigers.

Elijah breathed a sigh of relief. How horrible would it have been if *Uncle* was on the same flight as them.

Can you imagine? Thought Elijah.

Fantasia. The Greek word for demonic warfare in which a person becomes completely disconnected with reality and lives completely in a world of fantasy. Not talking about fairies and elves here. But the kind of fantasy where one imagines themselves to have a perfectly romantic two week trip in Costa Rica with no conflicts, difficulties or challenges. The kind of trip that Harlequin books are made of. Passionate. Circumstances always falling into place perfectly. Sunsets right, left and center. *Besa me mucho* constantly playing as a theme song in the background. Roses. Chocolates. Bliss.

Fantasia.

Poor Elijah didn't know what was going to hit him. Well, seeing *Uncle* at the airport would be the little tear in his

imaginary perfect world that would soon let out all the hot air of his imagination.

Hot air. Hot air would prove to be a theme for his trip.

+ + +

They landed. Juan Santamaría International Airport was quite crowded. Everything seems new and fresh when one is travelling.

This way Mary.

Mary had no idea where they were going to stay or what they were doing. She of course trusted Elijah— *he knows what he's doing, I'm sure it's going to be awesome*. She thought to herself. Elijah looked at her with a smile on his face. This was a moment of pride for him. He wanted every second to be a surprise.

Where are we going?

You'll see.

Come on. Just tell me!

We are going to a place called La Fortuna. We are going to the Arenal hot springs! I can't wait for you to see it! The travel agent said it was absolutely amazing... and the most romantic.

He winked.

She hugged his arm. She was so happy. Elijah was really so thoughtful. He was a little kid beaming with pride and excitement at all his plans.

After a turbulent three hour drive on a minibus, they arrived to Tabacon Thermal Resort and Spa. Fantasia. This is a place where dreams come true. They dropped their bags in the room. Both Mary and Elijah got into their bathing suits. They found two terry cloth robes waiting for them on the bed. The moment the robe slipped over Elijah's shoulder, he knew that he had arrived. Heaven. Or at least the illusion of it. Fantasia. He pushed away the awareness of his leaving in two

weeks and that this time was utterly transient. He leaned over and gave a gentle kiss on Mary's cheek and said:

Let's discover this place.

She kissed him back. Not as gently, and said:

After you.

Tabacon is a network of naturally heated cascading pools. The lush gardens strewn all around the hot spring pools along with the peaceful sound of trickling water made their discovery walk magical. In the background, looming over them, was the Arenal volcano. Costa Rica's not so sleeping giant. The Arenal is an active volcano. *Hot air* shoots out of its enormous mouth. As Elijah stared at the volcano, he too had an enormous amount of existential angst that kept being compressed inside of him. His childhood. His high school rebellion. His parents. His schooling. His lack of peace. His guilt at sharing a hotel room with a girl he wasn't married to. They were acting like they were on their honeymoon. All these inner struggles were kept in, safely. Some hot air would come out of Elijah at times. But now— he wanted to get lost in the beauty of his surroundings.

Mary and Elijah spent the afternoon going from one hot spring to the other.

So... what do you think?

Elijah. I can't believe we are actually here. I am blown away.

Me too. Mary. I just wish time could stop. I am so content here. The view. The weather. Everything is perfect. Are you happy with the room?

Are you kidding. Did you get a chance to look out from the balcony?

The view is incredible.

Right? You really out did yourself. Thank you.

I am in love with you.

Mary's heart stopped. Elijah had never said those words in the last three years. He said many things, but never — I am in love with you. She melted. She looked at him. I am in love with you too.

They both were lost in the beauty of what just happened. Fantasia.

+ + +

In the early evening, they got dressed and decided to go for dinner. The Tabacon restaurant had gone through a major renovation in the early 90s. The food here was more traditional to Costa Rica. This of course was very authentic. Both Elijah and Mary were so excited for the experience. This first official Costa Rican meal was the traditional rice and beans. Elijah ate and ate. I think the romantic setting and the hot springs must have drained him completely. So he ate and ate and ate.

It is important to note that beans have the same effect on humans whether they are in Egypt, Canada or Costa Rica. That evening, the Arenal volcano reminded Elijah not of his internal struggles, but of something so much more concrete... his bowels. After dinner both of them went for a long walk. Elijah was unable to focus on a single thing that Mary said. Mary was talking and talking, but the only thing Elijah could do was to keep himself from exploding. GRBLGURBLBLBULLBR. His stomach responded to Mary with long and loud growls of discontent. Elijah's Arenal needed to erupt. Elijah started to walk funny, clenching the muscles of his derriere in fear.

Babe, let's go back to our room.

Why? I am just loving the fresh air.

The air won't be so fresh if I don't get to our room. Elijah thought to himself. It's incredible how just a few beans can turn

an incredibly beautiful and romantic moment into a moment scribed in Hell.

Of course. My knee just is beginning to hurt from an old soccer injury. I don't know how much longer I will be able to walk.

Of course Eli. Of course. Let's go back.

Elijah was now walking like a penguin. Shifting from side to side as he held his own hot air made him look ridiculous. Mary was oblivious to the extreme anguish that he was in. Fantasia had dissolved. Sober panic was all that was left. Once he arrived to the room, he could hide it no longer. He ran into the washroom and within moments... the active volcano erupted. Elijah, on the way in, had turned on the tap to cover the sounds that would come out.

The tap. Everyone knows that the tap cannot cover any substantial sounds. Elijah, had to numb himself to the unfortunate turn of events. One moment he had told her that he was in love and the next he is doing the penguin poopoo dance. Devastating. Hot air.

Oh if it was only hot air, Elijah's woes would have ended there. To his overwhelming horror, not only had the tap not covered the sounds of world war three, but he had clogged the toilet. That is right. Ladies and gentlemen, he clogged the toilet. The water wouldn't stop flowing over the lip of the toilet. Elijah was now sweating as water was making it's way to the door. Soon, there would be a breach. Doom. Death. Elijah wanted to die as the water crossed the threshold of the bathroom door. Both the water and the smell crossed over. He flung open the door.

MARY. GET ON THE BED!

What's happening? What's going on? What's that smell?

Elijah could not look at her in the eyes, let alone answer her questions. He ran to the phone and called for the

concierge to come and clean up after him. That's right. He needed someone to clean up after him.

It took close to an hour for everything to be cleaned. Elijah's terry cloth robe was collateral damage. Elijah was quiet. Mary tried to make him feel better.

That night, Elijah slept on the couch. Fantasia was no more. Arenal had won.

+ + +

That night, his guardian angel smiled as he watched over Elijah asleep on the couch.

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2 Chronicles

Elijah had booked a visit to the Arenal volcano. People year round would make their way to the mouth of the volcano.

It was a glorious sight. Arenal would sometimes put on a show for his guests. Elijah and Mary, got on to the mini bus for the day trip. Of course, neither of them spoke about the events of the previous night. The lack of a terry cloth robe was however a constant reminder for Elijah. *It's a new day!* Thought Elijah. *Things are going to be perfect today.* As he tried to valiantly muster up all the remaining enthusiasm and positivity. In his heart though, he never recovered.

As they approached the final ascent of the mountain, they found the barriers down and the National park workers letting the driver know that Arenal is closed because he was misbehaving. Disappointed and frustrated both Elijah and Mary returned to the hot springs. They sat in the hot pools, read books, talked and enjoyed the healing waters. That evening, for dinner, Elijah did not eat the beans and rice.

+ + +

The following day, Elijah had planned the next adventure on their trip. Although Elijah himself did not enjoy extreme sports, everyone he spoke to told him that he just had to take Mary zip lining on Monte Verde.

Day one— Elijah's bowels erupted. Toilet flooded.

Day two— Arenal the volcano was closed to visitors.

Day three— the drive to Monte Verde.

No one told Elijah about the drive up Monte Verde. It is pretty evident that Monte Verde simply means in English the green mountain. The climb up Monte Verde was probably the most stressful thing that Elijah ever did in his life. They were on a coach bus. The first two hours of the three hour drive from La Fortuna to Monte Verde were very smooth. The bus driver had chosen a funny Costa Rican movie to play on the bus. And although neither Mary nor Elijah could understand Spanish, they found themselves enthralled by the movie.

Then the bus stopped.

Elijah looked to Mary and asked.

What's going on? We still have another hour for our destination.

Elijah who was sitting by the window on the right side made the mistake of looking out. There was no road on his right. There was only a sixty or seventy foot drop. He instinctively jumped away from the window thinking that he was going to single handedly keep the balance of the bus on the left in order for the bus to not tip over and fall. When he looked through the massive front windshield, he saw that the road up Monte Verde looked like a single lane that meandered and twisted and turned its way up the mountain. Interestingly enough, although it was the width of a single lane, in fact, the road was used for two way traffic.

The bus driver then did the unthinkable. He opened the door of the bus. He stepped out. It looked like he was calculating whether or not he was going to make the next turn or if he was going to fall and die in the seventy foot drop. He wanted to know if his front tires were going to make it! *What madness* thought Elijah. *What madness!* Both Mary and Elijah found themselves all of a sudden religious. Every time the bus stopped and they looked out at the cliff to their right, they would somehow find themselves almost praying with

tears. Repentance was offered. Vows were renewed. Promises to attend church weekly were made. Each started calling on the different saints they each knew. Elijah could of sworn that Mary had even made up names of saints he had never heard of.

Abu who? *Abu Turbo*? Is he... like... a really fast saint?

I don't know. I've just heard my parents call on his name when they are afraid. Is this really the time to criticize me? We are about to die. Our parents don't know where we are. Did we have to go up death mountain??? Elijah, what were we thinking?

The worst was when oncoming traffic was coming down the mountain...and the bus had to reverse down the mountain to make room for the oncoming cars. That was the worst. Actually— the worst!

Bism el Saleeb! Bism el Saleeb!

Elijah crossed himself hundreds of times in that last hour. *Bism el Saleeb* was a saying that Copts all around the world whispered, spoke out or yelled— depending on the varying levels of perceived danger. It means in the name of the cross. Elijah wasn't really thinking of the cross. In fact, many people say it without spending much time thinking about the ACTUAL cross of the Lord. What they are really interested in is the power that comes with the cross. Power to ward off bad circumstances, chase away evil spirits and evidently power to keep a coach bus in Costa Rica from falling off the side of a mountain. Mary was somewhat amused at seeing Elijah's religious side come out. He had all but renounced his faith. You see, Mary still held on to her faith— she would convince herself— she was just delaying her repentance. She knew that her lifestyle was wrong, but she told herself that one day before she dies she will fix things. But Elijah, seemed to her, to have forsaken his faith altogether.

BISM EL SALEEB! Elijah yelled. Which, to the locals who were on the bus, seemed to be more fearful than the bus ride itself. In fact, the only comfort that both Mary and Elijah found was that the locals were completely unfazed by the whole ordeal. That last hour of the drive up the mountain felt like seven hours. When the bus driver finally made it to more level ground at the top of the mount, both Mary and Elijah instinctively clapped for the driver. Everyone else just stared at them.

Elijah, like the videos of the pope that he had seen as a young child, knelt down and kissed the ground when he got off the bus. He looked ridiculous— as though he had just completed a cross Atlantic flight.

Get up Elijah! You're embarrassing me!

Elijah was hurt by those words. Little did he know that it was only going to get worse.

They made a mistake in their room and gave them two single beds. The quality of the hotel he had booked at the top of Monte Verde was a little... well... lower than he expected—he could never have imagined the conditions of the sleeping arrangements. It was bad. Really bad. The rooms were tiny. The sheets were musty. The air stuffy. The furniture was dusty. Mary was not happy. Elijah wanted to die. Such good intentions. Disaster.

Elijah. How many stars is this hotel?

Actually it is a three star. But when I booked it, I was told that it was a high end three star.

How long are we here for? I feel so stressed. I am in the dark. I don't know where we are going. What we are doing. I know nothing. I know you are excited to surprise me for everything, but this is no longer fun. I am stressed. What else did you plan? Sky diving off this mountain?

Elijah burst out laughing. Skydiving. NO! Of course not. He turned away and mumbled: *no I planned to take you on the*

country's longest 5 km zip lining through the rain forest. That's all.

Mary wasn't enjoying her time in Costa Rica. Elijah was so upset.

Mary saw that she had hurt Elijah and that he had such good intentions. But she was frustrated. She had imagined that they were going to spend a couple of weeks on the beach, sunbathing, sipping pina colada and stocking up on Vitamin D. She tried to make things better by saying that the room was not that bad. Let's make the best of this time we...

She was interrupted by a loud knock on the door.

Pura Vida Amigos! Iss tine! Jure adventure is waiting for ju! What adventure Elijah?

Well... I planned for us to go on a beautiful adventure ziplining through the rain forest.

WHAT? ZIP LINING? What are you thinking? It's like you don't know me at all! Where have you been for the last three years? Don't you know I hate heights!

Khello? Meester Eliya. Are ju there?

Yes. We are coming! We'll be there in a moment.

Khokay! *Pura Vida* Amigos!

Elijah shot a frustrated glance at Mary.

I am going zip lining. Are you coming or am I just going to go on my own.

Mary held back her tears. She could tell that Elijah was under pressure. Pressure he had put on himself to please her. But he didn't have to be mean about it. She bit her lip so that she wouldn't burst into tears. She wanted to yell— YOU GO ON YOUR OWN! But instead she answered:

I am coming.

+ + +

They got on the bus. Unthinkable. They didn't speak a word to each other the whole way to the zip line. They took the safety

lessons. They signed the waivers. They harnessed. They zipped. She hated it. He hated it even more. She felt like she was going to throw up. He threw up. She was kind of happy he did. Then she felt guilty. Then she felt sorry for him. They got back on the bus. Unthinkable. They didn't speak a word to each other the whole way to the hotel.

+ + +

They spent one night in the awful hotel. Elijah woke up the next morning determined to once again fix things. He found the best five star all inclusive hotel in Costa Rica— Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica at Peninsula Papagayo— and he booked it.

The ego is sometimes described as the problem solver. Well, Elijah's wounded ego was going to give it one more try. *Pura Vida* he told himself. *Pura Vida!*

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Ezra

P*ura Vida*. Pure Life. This is the most famous saying in Costa Rica. Pure Life. Costa Rica is very unique— as a country, they have decided to dismantle their army and to spend all their funds on education and the environment. The president is so down to earth he uses public transit to get around. *Pura Vida* Costa Rica! This counter North American set of values and priorities really is seen in how the beautiful people of Costa Rica live in simplicity and joy.

This pure life was not what Elijah and Mary were looking for. Five Star. All inclusive. Comfort. The good life. Pac-Man.

Finally, Elijah got it right. Day five and he got it right. Mary's happiness returned. They arrived to the Four Seasons Resort at Peninsula Papagayo and immediately their trip took on a turn for the better. Although Elijah's guardian angel would have disagreed with that last statement. This place was all about its guests. Everything yelled pleasure. Everything was about the details of one's comfort. The food. The view. The towels. Oh the towels. Cha Ching. Elijah scored. Mary was in heaven.

Elijah. You killed it.

Honestly?

Of course, Elijah knew that he killed it, but he was fishing for more compliments to boost his mortally wounded ego.

Yes, honestly Elijah. I love it! This place is heaven. I mean, look at their attention to detail. This room is beautiful. The

view is incredible. The pools are pristine. The food smells amazing. I love you Elijah.

I love you too. I am so sorry about the nightmare of the last few days. You don't have to worry about anything anymore, we are here for the next eight days. We are not going to do any more moving. I was able to cancel all the other "outings" I had planned. We shall eat, drink and be merry!

Elijah was at his core a gentleman— kind of. Like so many people, he loved to make others happy. It was really hard on him when Mary was upset. For him it was a matter of identity. Her unhappiness translated into seeing himself as a failure. When one's identity is attached to someone else's reaction or perception of you— it becomes an identity roller coaster. *One moment I am awesome. One moment I suck.* One becomes a slave to others' opinions. In a twisted kind of way, one seeks to please others in order to ultimately please oneself. It is a subtle lie— but a violent one.

People pleasers always see themselves as good people who fall victim to others. Elijah was so proud of himself that he had planned all these adventures for "her"— he saw himself as a good person. Then his world collapsed when things didn't go his way. He became the victim. Although things were on the rise because of Mary's approval which translated into his own happiness— he would one day recognize that he changed because of this week.

Since Elijah was young, he always saw himself as a hippie and a bohemian academic. He experienced a massive shift in his core views as he entered into a week of self indulgence at the resort. Since his childhood, his parents had lived the life of new immigrants. They weren't poor by any means. But they weren't rich either. This level of luxury was completely foreign to him. George, his dad, always wanted to live more like this, but couldn't. This was Pac-Man. Elijah was about to take the joystick and play Pac-Man.

Materialism and extreme hedonism seem to offer so much happiness. The workers at the resort were at their every beck and call. Anything you could possibly want is at your fingertips... literally. It's amazing how subtle and easily the human soul allows itself to enter into this utter state of entitlement. Ironically, like any drug, you always need more to achieve that first high. And so, the flip side to entitlement is discontent. How, one may ask, is it possible for one to complain at a five star all inclusive hotel? In fact, it is the five star hotel that teaches one to complain. It's the physical manifestation of Descartes' philosophy. I consume therefore I am. *Homo consumus*. Latin for Consuming Man. I consume therefore I am. If anything threatens my consumption— it is actually threatening my very being, my identity— my isness!

Ugh. There is sand on my towel! I am going to complain, Mary. This is just not acceptable. I mean I am paying an arm and a leg and I better have clean towels.

I am kind of tired of filet mignon every night. I know that there are a number of different steaks available, but I just feel like they could spice things up a little bit.

Their pina coladas have way too much pineapple in them.

I can't believe it's July and the ocean seems a little cooler than I expected.

The air conditioning isn't working as fast as I was expecting it to. I mean it's been two minutes and the room is just now cooling down. Ugh.

I like the terry cloth robes, but it seems that they are using a one size fits all. It seems a little big for me under the arms. It kind of makes me look big, right Mary?

The evening entertainment is OK. I mean they seem to put in a lot of effort, but to be honest Mary, it's just feels like something is missing. It's almost like they are trying too hard. It's just not what I expected.

And yet, this complaining unwittingly creates a further desire in humans to have things just perfectly perfect in their lives. Once one tastes a certain level of luxury and comfort, it is very difficult to move away from the ever widening gate that leads to destruction. The narrow gate now seems impossible, and frankly, unwanted.

+ + +

Fantasia. When the fantasy becomes reality— even if it is short lived— it becomes the new normal. And so, Elijah and Mary’s fantasy “honey moon” became reality for eight days. They never recovered.

+ + +

Their flight home was uneventful. The plane food really accented how amazing the filet mignon at the resort really was. Something had changed in Elijah and Mary. Both of them felt it. Both of them found themselves hungry for this lifestyle. They had tasted the good life— illusionary and transient as it was— and they wanted it badly.

Elijah. I can’t tell you how much I enjoyed the last few days with you.

Are you kidding it was heaven. Of course, besides the sandy towels, the slow air conditioning units, the ocean being too cold and the night entertainment... it was perfect. They were both quiet for a few minutes.

Mary... how am I going to survive the year with you in New York?

I don’t know. But it’s only one year. Start applying so you can move there next year. I keep telling myself it is just one year.

It is going to be one tough year.

They were both quiet again. It was Elijah, again, who broke the silence.

Oh my... how will you explain your tan to your parents?

They both laughed.

They won't even notice. They are too busy getting divorced and fighting about money... if they ask, I'll just convince them that New York is really sunny in July.

I know we aren't married... but how do we not end up like our parents. My parents don't have a romantic bone in them. Their relationship is purely functional. And well... your parents are getting divorced? How are we going to survive?

I don't know. One of my biggest fears is that one day you wake up and say that you don't love me anymore.

Mary. I will always love you!

Martina! He had said the same exact words to Martina. This really unnerved him. What if I don't have feelings for her one day. What if SHE doesn't like me one day? I mean, she could hardly look at me after zip-lining. Is love really that fickle? Well, all we have to do is live the way we did in the last few days. Good food. Good drinks. Good life. Everything will be fine.

+ + +

Everything wasn't fine. Toronto was no five star resort. Elijah complained about everything. What had once been completely acceptable to him became hideous and unbearable. Mary was tired of his complaining, but said nothing knowing that there were only a few weeks before she was moving to New York. Their time together was very... physical. They didn't talk about philosophy or go to Yoga anymore. Something was happening to Elijah that even Mary was having a hard time bearing. Pac-Man. *Homo consumus*. He wanted to consume

everything. Even her. She hated that. She looked forward to New York. She would be safe there.

+ + +

September 11, 1996. Elijah's birthday. He found a letter in the mail from Mary.

Dear Elijah,

I don't know any easy way to say this, but I just don't think we are going to work out. You are in Toronto, I am in New York. I loved the last three years of my life with you. I will never forget you. But I can't continue this way. I have changed. I just don't think I can be with you anymore. Please forgive me. It's not you. It's me.

Mary.

Really? On my birthday?

Elijah was heartbroken... but not. His inner temple was in ruins. But his time of exile had almost made him completely forget that he even had an inner temple.

At first he was upset. Then he was angry. Then he got over it. So he thought.

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Nehemiah

The fall semester of his last year was colder than usual. Both on the inside and the outside. He felt it safer that way. The breakup was painful. No. It was traumatic. He spent so much of his savings on this one trip. Only for Mary to dump him a month and a half later?

Love? Bull!

Elijah never noticed the pattern. He couldn't see how both Martina and Mary were unhappy for largely the same reasons. He couldn't recognize his self-centered egotism and how it affected his relationships. He couldn't see how much he needed to learn. Whether he couldn't or wouldn't didn't really matter. He just didn't learn. Instead, he vowed to build a wall so thick around his heart that NO ONE would ever have access to it. And so he built and built... a wall... a thick wall.

Elijah became a very self-confident person. Funny enough, this self-confidence was born out of his lack of confidence. Such a mystery. Strange how humans compensate for the very thing that they are lacking by appearing to have an over abundance of it. Arrogance is what many called it behind his back. He decided to drown himself in his studies and his weekend parties. He made a number of friends. Each was very unique. Weird actually. They didn't fit as a cohesive group. But Elijah learned how to get along with each one alone. Each offered something different to Elijah.

First, there was Gregory. He was the poet, philosopher, academic, savant author and editor. Elijah and Gregory could

sit and discuss Heidegger's existential philosophy and its contribution to modernity and post-modernity. They were able to talk about ontology and humanism and at the same time loved to sift through the latest conspiracy theories. Deep down both Gregory and Elijah didn't really believe the majority of them to be theories. Gregory was probably the most intelligent person Elijah had ever met, and yet, Gregory in his own way was extremely humble. He loved to self deprecate in one breath and pontificate in the next. Elijah and he would just howl at how unenlightened the world around them was. He helped build Elijah's wall.

Second, there was Robert. He was an athlete and a hard core party animal. He loved to hit the gym with Elijah and loved to challenge him to push himself. He was single handedly responsible for Elijah's pride and joy— his six pack. Robert also loved to challenge and push Elijah at the bar. Shots. Shots. Shots. Shots. Shots. Elijah loved how much fun he had with Robert. Their conversations were an inch deep, but sometimes that was exactly what Elijah needed. He, too, helped build Elijah's wall.

Third, there was Nehemiah. He was the social connoisseur, the social butterfly who knew all things high end. He loved to organize the most outrageously posh and shooshy escapades. He loved luxury. He had incredibly sophisticated taste.... which translated into incredibly expensive taste. Nehemiah was a wall builder himself. He would hide behind expensive clothing, fashion, accessories, shoes, cars. His apartment felt like you were visiting an art gallery. He offered Elijah the thrills of the high life. \$250 dinner at Ruth's Chris was not an anomaly. Nehemiah was the best at helping Elijah build his wall.

His three friends made his semester fly by. His applications to law school were all sent out by the end of

November. He did not apply to New York. December came and he planned to go home for Christmas.

What was he thinking?

+ + +

George and Sally were so excited that their only son was coming home for Christmas. They hadn't seen him since Easter of this year since he didn't come home for the summer. Mama made Elijah all his favorite foods. Grape leaves stuffed with rice and meat. *Goulash*, phyllo pastry stuffed with meat. *Macarona bel bechamel*, essentially pasta with bechamel sauce and filled with meat. Now this was all very surprising for Elijah. Not that his mom made him his favorite foods, but that she made him all his favorite *feast* foods while they were still in the fast.

The Advent fast begins on November 25th and lasts till January 7th. The fast usually consists in becoming a vegan throughout the 40 days and also traditionally includes a time of abstinence from all food in the morning. Recap. So the two elements are a delayed breakfast and the food one eats is vegan. Also, depending on which fast one finds themselves in, one may be allowed fish or not. Actually, the rule is something like this, no fish on Wednesdays and Fridays and all of lent. Actually, it's not just fish. It's all seafood. But then again, one is also not allowed fish on the eve of the feast—also called Paramon. Also, important to note is that the time of one's delayed fasting depends on what one's spiritual father or confessor advises them to do. Some people eat at 9 AM while others would abstain from food and drink till 6 PM. OK. Back to Elijah and his shock.

This was the Advent fast. He was allowed fish. Actually, seafood. Anyways, the shock came from the fact that when he was growing up, his parents were Nazis about the fast. He remembers not being allowed to eat things with whey powder

in them. As a teenager he found the whole thing to be quite pharisaic... that is legalistic. Modified milk ingredients... nope. No good. On the other hand, Copts had become so creative in their vegan foods that they made the most amazing meals out of tofu. Tofu cheese, tofu meat, tofu sour cream, tofu mayonnaise, tofu tofu. However, the vegan *crème de la crème* (or should one say the soy milk *de la soy milk*) is tofu shawarma. It actually tastes better than the real thing.

Is it really fasting? Elijah would ask himself. Elijah was not alone in asking. There was a point at which, in many families, fasting times just meant a shift in proteins but not a shift in the meals and definitely not a shift in the heart. With time, first generation Coptic parents found themselves being challenged by their kids about the point of fasting. To which, they had very few answers. This then led to one of two options. Either they dug deeper and strove to find out why Copts fast two thirds of the year, or they slowly began to relax their attitude towards fasting. George himself remembered fasting for Elijah to begin speaking— that was probably the strictest time of his life when it came to fasting. Then with time, they began the slippery slope of bending the rules. What's some cream on my coffee. Soy milk was just disgusting.

In fact, George told himself, coffee mate is so bad for me that I am taking care of the temple of God when I take cream in my coffee. I am sure that is what Jesus would want me to do.

He never imagined that there would have been a third and fourth option, namely of black coffee or no coffee. That would have meant sacrifice. One shudders at the thought of sacrifice... especially when concerning coffee.

Cream in coffee became cheese in sandwiches, which then became delaying fasting by a week or two, and finally ended with not fasting except the day before the feast. But, of course, still while having cream in his coffee.

So, when Sally took George's opinion on what she should make for Elijah, it was not a big shift or a big deal for Sally to make all the yummy food she made for her boy... after all, God is a God of hearts... right? Right? Anyone?

Not knowing why one is fasting is not reason to just abandon fasting altogether. But Elijah's stomach and mind were quite thankful for the religious decay he found in his parents. What would be next? Were Sunday mornings now optional?

Elijah and his parents ate. They pigged out actually. They slept. And well...they erupted. He dreamt of Costa Rica.

+ + +

January 6th was probably the first time since Easter that Elijah stepped into a church. In the 90s, Copts were busy building beautiful Coptic churches all over Ontario. And though the church had a beautiful *iconostasis* and pews and gorgeous expensive chandeliers, many of the older members missed the days when they would pray in school gyms. Now this may seem to be a paradox. When they were in the gyms, they imagined they were in proper canonical Orthodox churches yet while now they were in these properly built churches and they longed for the good old days of the gym. It makes perfect sense, since, in the gyms there was a real sense of unity and family— numbers were much smaller, people felt noticed, needed, working together to make something greater than themselves. A lot of that was gone with the building of churches. Of course, the *uncles* and *tantes* were happy that they didn't have to put away chairs and setup altars and take down altars... but there was a different kind of building that they missed.

The most essential building was ultimately spiritual. The building of the *ecclesia*— that is just the Greek word for the assembly, or more accurately, it means the calling out. It was

this spiritual building that the elders were missing, it was the calling out of God's people, coming together in the assembly and becoming one with God. As things became easier and more efficient, churches were built and the *ecclesia* came to mean simply— church... and to be understood as the brick and mortar of a building.

Elijah was somewhat feeling nostalgic about being at church for Christmas eve. This feeling only lasted five minutes. He never could understand why the deacons loved to sing hymns that would last for what felt like forever.

One vowel. That's it. One vowel... for 2 minutes and 37 seconds? Why? Elijah asked himself after timing one of the deacons.

He was bored. Of course he was bored. Church had nothing to do with him. What a tragedy he thought. And yet, there were men and women who seemed to him to be fully engaged in the service. He wondered what that would be like. He didn't realize that the Church had by design made worship boring. Not in the sense of monotony, but in the sense that worship was completely about God and not the person worshiping. It was never meant to be entertaining. In fact, from the perspective of the worshiper, Liturgy was all about God.

From my Son's perspective, my sweet Elijah, Liturgy is all about you. My Son gave you His body and His blood that you may be united to Him and that you may have Life in you. He gives you the Holy Spirit that you may come to know Him and experience Him. He gives Himself completely to you. Will you receive Him? Will you receive us?

It wouldn't be the first Christmas that the Theotokos and her sweet sweet Son would be kept out because of walls.

+ + +

Christmas break was surprisingly refreshing. George and Sally were ecstatic about Elijah potentially moving back for

law school. Their son had just climbed the Coptic career totem pole. This made them both so happy.

He will be a success.

Thought George.

He will finally be a success.

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Tobit

Elijah completed his last semester of undergrad at Trinity College. Gregory, Robert and Nehemiah were his companions throughout his last year. Since Mary was gone to New York, and since she was gone gone... forever, Elijah found himself needing his friends so much more. Of the three, Elijah was most attached to Gregory.

One day, while Elijah was sitting awake in his bed thinking about his friends, he discovered that all three mirrored aspects of his own soul. The scholar. The wild party animal. The sophisticated bourgeois.

Come on man! We can get a place to stay in Ottawa. It'll be awesome. Elijah said to Gregory. He was trying to convince him to move back with him.

I am not sure I want to live in a small town.

What are you talking about? It's the nation's capital.

Toronto should have been the capital. Actually, it is more a capital than Ottawa ever can be!

Just think about it. It would be so awesome to do law school together.

Such a short conversation. Such a simple proposal. Gregory really did love being around Elijah. Both were so compatible. Although he was accepted to better schools, in the end, Gregory chose to go and study law at University of Ottawa— almost solely for Elijah's sake.

Elijah knew this. Gregory never admitted it. Elijah was really thankful for his good friend.

+ + +

Elijah and Gregory moved into a shooshy part of town called Westboro. They found a really modern three bedroom condo that was close enough to Ottawa U but was far enough from the craziness of downtown. Nehemiah would have totally approved of their lifestyle. George and Sally were distraught when Elijah announced to them that he was not going to be living at home.

Eh-wat? Eh-wai? Eh-were?

That's all he got from his dad. Somehow, George knew that Elijah was past the point of being convinced or coerced to do what he wanted. He presented his weak protest. Elijah was firm. That is where it ended for George.

In Elijah's mind, there was no way he would ever be able to live at home. Sally was satisfied with the promise of Sunday evening family dinners.

Elijah, for the most part, actually stuck to his word and would go home for dinners on Sundays. Their conversations were always about the same three things— his return to church, his plans to come back and live with them at home and his plans to get married. His reply to all three was an unabashed no! Yet, mamas are not easy to be convinced. Weekly Sally asked. Weekly Sally was answered. It did not deter her.

+ + +

Gregory was an awesome friend to live with. He was for the most part really easy on Elijah's ego. All Gregory needed was good coffee, good chocolate and his books. His library, which took up the third bedroom, boasted fifteen hundred books.

Not only had he read them all, but he could tell you exactly on what page and which paragraph you could find the passage he was quoting. Elijah was very envious of his photographic memory. It served Gregory immensely in his study of law. Elijah had to work twice as hard keep up with his classes. Gregory, on the other hand, would use his extra time to... read more. Gregory had a real appetite for knowledge.

Elijah. Have you heard of Lao Tzu?

Lao who?

No. Lao TZU.

No. Let me guess, he lives somewhere on one of your shelves among the bazillions of books you have read?

Elijah's tone was not meant to be as nasty as it may have sounded. But Gregory was very simple and the hint of Elijah's envy was not picked up.

No. It's a new book. Actually, Lao Tzu is the author of this book I just got from a used bookstore in the Glebe. Eighty one chapters. This guy was on to something.

Yeah? Elijah tried to be interested.

Yeah. He is a philosopher, but nothing like anything I have read of the Western thinkers. This guy is incredible. Simple. Profound. To the point. Yet, completely different. It's like he didn't care about all the same things we care about in our lives. And yet, you feel like he really knows things. I am having a hard time describing him. He's mysterious. He's different... he's just different. Can I read you something?

Sure.

A person of great virtue is like the flowing water.

Water benefits all things and contends not with them.

It puts itself in a place that no one wishes to be and thus is closest to Tao.

Tao? Like General Tao Chicken?

No Elijah. The word Tao literally means Way. Lao Tzu observes that everything follows an invisible pattern. Everything that is true follows the pattern of heaven. That is what he calls the Tao. This is such a gem I found. Chapter eight continues.

A virtuous person is like water which adapts itself to the perfect place.

His mind is like the deep water that is calm and peaceful.

His heart is kind like water that benefits all.

His words are sincere like the constant flow of water.

*His governing is natural, without desire
which is like the softness of water that penetrates through
hard rocks.*

His work is of talent like the free flow of water.

*His movement is of right timing like water that flows
smoothly.*

*A virtuous person never forces his way and hence will not
make faults.*

Wow. That is pretty intense.

Elijah was serious now. He kind of felt pretty dumb about his General Tao Chicken comment. But Gregory had the ability of not being moved by Elijah's silliness. It's like Gregory could see through Elijah's clowning. He was right. This chapter was heavy.

Yeah. More than intense. I love how Lao Tzu compares a person of virtue to water. I mean, he really captures how beautiful water is. I mean, have you ever thought of how selfless and sacrificial water is?

Definitely not. Wow. Read that again.

This time Gregory reread the passage without any interruptions.

The passage stung Elijah a little.

I am NOTHING like water, he said quite honestly.

Right? I mean, I feel like I typically only try to benefit myself...

Both Elijah and Gregory seemed to be introspective and took some time to be quiet. Elijah's heart hardened. It hardened shockingly fast. Then all of a sudden he spoke up. It almost felt like it wasn't even Elijah speaking, but some force inside of him. A strong and angry energy exuded from him.

It's not practical. It's not practical at all. I mean, think about those pests who go around begging downtown. Are you telling me that I am supposed to be like water and benefit all of them? What, am I supposed to do at school or standing in front of a judge? Am I supposed to *never force my way and hence be faultless*? That's not even realistic. As lawyers, we are actually being trained to be like rocks, not like water. Pft... water. Whatever!

Gregory was taken aback by Elijah's sudden visceral reaction and change in opinion. Gregory, inspired by the chapter that he had just read twice, absorbed Elijah's negativity like a still and calm lake would absorb a rock thrown into it. Gregory never shared again about Lao Tzu.

+ + +

Elijah and Gregory completed their first year of law school. Elijah felt like it flew by. He was definitely thankful for Gregory, his good and faithful friend. There were plenty of pretty girls in law school, but Elijah was not interested at all. Both Mary and Martina had wrecked his heart. He didn't often allow himself to think of either of them, but the memory of his heartbreak was enough to keep girls at bay. He told

himself that he needed to focus on his schooling so he could make it big in life.

He had his whole future figured out. It was May 1998. He was going to graduate in May 1999, take his Bar exam January 2000 while he was articling. July 2000 he would get a killer job downtown Toronto, preferably on Bay Street. After killing himself for three years working his way up from a junior to a partner, that brings us to July 2003, he would finally open himself up to looking for a girl. At that point, he figured that he would be irresistible. 2004 his first Mercedes. 2006 Ferrari. Of course, he wouldn't rush into marriage so he figures he would get married by 2008-2009. He was flexible with himself about that part. Then the rest... well... the rest stressed him out so he paused his life planning at marriage and Ferraris.

This time it was *Mar Mena* who smiled and said to a blind and deaf Elijah.

Have you forgotten that you are one of us?

All of a sudden, the strangest memory came to Elijah. *Uncle Onsi. Remember. You are one of us.*

He chuckled. *I am nothing like you.* Suddenly, he tensed up and his whole body shuddered. He felt like his heart was as hard as a rock.

That's right future, here I come.

+ + +

Of course, all of Elijah's life planning happened before he met Esther.

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Judith

Fauteux Library was the main law library at Ottawa U. Like Super Mario, it had many levels. The third floor was where everyone met and socialized on the old green and purple couches. The fourth floor was the actual library where students would attempt to study. The fifth floor was quieter than a Cistercian monastery— only the real law students studied on the fifth floor. If you were breathing too loudly, you would get death stares from the older students. It's where all the references were kept. The fifth floor was really a no fly zone for anyone who wasn't serious about studying. It was there that Elijah and Gregory would study.

It was the beginning of September 1999. Last year of Law school. He was now the senior and had happily taken on the responsibility of guardian of the library. He was now the deliverer of death stares to any one and everyone who did not enter the library with reverence. Every few hours they would go down to the third floor, with the commoners, and take a break.

It was September 9th, two days before his birthday, when he saw Esther for the first time. He did a double take. But he told himself—focus on your life plan. This is not the time to be thinking about girls! So, disciplined as he was, he pretended that she didn't absolutely knock the wind out of him with her beauty and presence.

Focus Elijah. Haven't you learned your lesson? Martina and Mary. Martina and Mary. You don't want to do this Elijah. Stop

looking Elijah. You're gawking Elijah. Snap out of it Elijah.

She noticed that he was staring, she looked down and graciously pretended that she hadn't noticed. Of course this held his attention even more. Elijah, like Holophernes of old, had no chance.

Period.

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Esther

Esther. O Esther. Where does one begin?
Esther was born to a Coptic family in Egypt. In Shobra, to be specific. On Tosson Street, to be more specific. In the apartment across from the church of the *Malak*. That just means angel. They actually mean Archangel Michael, to be really specific. She was born at 3:33 AM, on the third floor, in the third bedroom. Her parents just looked at her and both said to each other. Esther? They smiled. And so Esther received her name. In Arabic, it sounds like Esteer. Well, that's neither here nor there.

Both Mama and *Baba* were absolutely and completely in love with their little Esteer. She was *Baba's* girl. And well... she was also Mama's girl. Her big beautiful eyes always seemed to be opened— from that age she seemed to perceive everything. She was completely silent for the first week of her life. Her cry was more of a gentle moan. Her parents, Mena and Helen, were concerned about her lack of crying so they took her to the doctor. Dr. Khalil, who was good friends with Mena, burst out laughing when they nervously explained their daughter's condition. He picked her up, examined her, turned her over, checked her from head to toe. He put her down. He squeezed her little hand, right at the pressure point between her thumb and her index, and a little whimper escaped from her sealed mouth. And the most insanely magical thing happened... a little tear slowly formed and trickled down her cheek. He had hurt her. A second tear fell. The whole event was

heartbreaking. How was it possible for a one week old baby to have such grace, such self-control, such dignity. The doctor reassured Helen and Mena that little Esther was in fact fine.

My sweet little Esther, you are our little flower. My Son is especially fond of you.

Mama gently wiped her two tears. No one noticed. They were too busy talking about Polio vaccines and such. Helen did smell a strange fragrance of roses. It lasted for less than a second.

+ + +

Esther captivated the hearts of anyone that saw her. She could not speak till the age of five. But her parents were not worried. They had consecrated their lives to the Lord years before they were married, and so they were not afraid of her deep deep silence. After the first scare they had when she was a baby, they decided to commit their daughter to the Lord and to never worry about her.

You know Helen, if I feel this kind of love for our little Esther, how much more does the Lord love her. If I believed that God loves me only half as much as I love Esther, then I would be the happiest person. But the truth is that He loves me and Esther infinitely more.

Mena, you are right. Let's commit to always depend on Him. She is His daughter!

It's amazing, because that conversation was a real turning point for Esther's parents. For the rest of their lives, they completely and whole heartedly surrendered Esther to the Lord. And so Esther was silent for the first five years of her life. Now, this may not sound like a big deal, but little Esther was surrounded by a world that was anything but silent.

Shobra.

A suburb of Cairo with the highest concentration of Coptic Christians in all of Egypt. It's narrow streets are lined with

street vendors, kids running in flip flops, carts loaded with fruits or vegetables, carts being pulled by donkeys, cars being driven by humans... it's a real jungle. All the senses come alive in Shobra.

Lamooooooooon. Lamooooooooon. Lamooooooooon. (That is the sound made by the lemon vendors crying out at the top of their lungs).

Those who hear the call and would like to purchase lemons don't even have to descend from their apartments. Windows open. Baskets are lowered. Lemons are placed. Baskets are pulled up. At some point money is exchanged. Incredibly efficient.

Lamooooooooon. Lamooooooooon. Lamooooooooon. And so the liturgy of the streets continues. Of course there are many competing cries. But somehow, they form a harmonious choir to the heart of those who live in Shobra.

Bekyaaaaaaaa. Bekyaaaaaaaa. Bekyaaaaaaaa. (That is the sound of the guy who is calling out for people's scraps— he then takes the scraps and recycles them and sells them).

Zabadeeeeeeee. Zabadeeeeeeee. Zabadeeeeeeee. (Yoghurt and milk products).

As for the smells, depending on which part of Shobra you find yourself in, it may be the smell of fresh mangoes, or maybe the smell of barbeque corn on the cob, or maybe salted fish. All these smells were always mixed with the smell coming from the exhausts of the four billion cars perpetually driving around Shobra. But the one thing that is sure, is that there was always a smell.

Shobra.

Life begins at around 9 PM and ends around 4 AM. Every day. 365.

For a Coptic person, Shobra is either where you live, where your family lives, or where you come from. The windows are lined with pictures of Jesus, St Mary, Baba Kyrillos, Mar

Mena... The pictures bring peace to the weary mind of the Coptic people. Overcrowded. Overworked. The people of Shobra are somehow incredibly joyful people. Everyone knows everyone. OK. Maybe not everyone... but pretty close.

And then there was Esther.

She, in her deep deep silence, stood in such contrast to... well... everything Shobra. Her vulnerability made Helen and Mena love her so much more. Snuggles. Cuddles. Gazings. She was loved. Oh Esther. So special. So unique.

+ + +

Her first word was Yah. She would point to the picture of Jesus and say Yah. Her parents had always pointed to the icon and would say: *Baba Yassou3*. That is *Baba Yassou3*!

A note is necessary at this point to explain why the number 3 is placed at the end of *Yassou3*. The number three looks like an Arabic letter (ع) called *3ain*. The sound that the *3ain* makes is like making an air bubble at the back of your throat while pushing out your voice. Try it. *3ain*. Good. Try that again. *3ain*. *3ain*. Now put that at the end of *Yassou3*. Well done. That is how you say Jesus in Arabic.

Coptic children are first introduced to the Lord Jesus as *Baba Yassou3*. Then they grow into understanding that there is a difference between calling on God the Father and God the Son. It's complicated. But they eventually figure it all out.

For some reason, Esther sorted out her hypostatic theology and skipped the *Baba* in *Baba Yassou3* and just went for Yah. Her parents were ecstatic.

Yalla Esther, say it again. Yes! Say it again.

Yah... Yah... Yah Yah.

First words are very important. Just as most babies' first words are either Mama or Dada, their words express a desire

to return to their source. This was true for little Esther. And so ended Esther's *first* deep silence.

+ + +

Esther, now eight years old, was so nourished by her parents' love and their pure way of life that one felt like she was from a different planet. Innocence like the falling petals of a flower, once they have fallen, leave a flower naked and well... unsightly. Esther's petals never fell. They just became more and more beautiful with time.

Esther loved flowers. She would talk to them. Smell them. Ask them questions. Esther not only saw beauty in them, but she saw in each one a unique gift from Yah. Each color. Each shape. Big flowers received the same attention as the little one. Helen noticed and filled their apartment with flowers of all colors and shapes and sizes.

The following conversations were all in Arabic. The translations will have to do at this point.

O Rose of Sharon. How I love your big petals. Your deeper and more vibrant colors are hidden in your center. You show the world your gentle pastels and hide your inner beauty from the one who doesn't take time to know you. I want to know you. Oh how detailed are your style and stigma (Those are technical parts. Here she was not speaking of her style, but rather that is the name of the middle protruding centerpiece of a flower and the stigma is its tip). A universe unto itself! Each micro flower growing on your style a world to discover. Habibi Yassou3, who were you thinking about when you created this flower...

She paused.

Of course. You were thinking of Mama. I mean your Mama, I mean that makes her my Mama too. You were thinking of Mama Mariam, because her beauty was hidden from everyone. And her thoughts that she kept inside her, each a little flower.

You're probably thinking, what kid at the age of eight speaks like that and thinks like that. The answer is Esther. And this little sampling of her thoughts is just the translation. Enough said.

Oh sweet, Rose of Sharon. Not only are you beautiful but you taste so beautiful. I love drinking carcade (Arabic for red hibiscus tea). You are so refreshing. Mama. You are even more beautiful than this Rose of Sharon.

And you my dear chrysanthemum. You are a mystery to me. I don't know how you look so perfect. All your petals exactly the same shape. And yet, the petals in the middle are so gently and sweetly folded. They grow the further they move out from your tiny gentle middle. Each petal, gently folded, looks like open hands in prayer. I bet you are praying all day. What are you asking for? Does He answer you the way He answers me? I know. You must be asking for nothing. I bet you are just screaming to the world.

Don't be blind! Don't look at me as though I made myself. Look at what I am communicating about Him! He made me. It is not I who made myself. Look to Him!!!

I know. You're probably wondering when humans are going to follow your lead. No? Are you saying no? You have never said that? Oh... you don't question the children of Adam. OK. Well, I will learn from you o grand chrysanthemum, I will learn from you to not question the children of Adam either.

Esther's favorite though was the White Lotus flower famous in Egypt.

You are my best friend dear Lotus. You who were born on the water. All life comes from the water. But, you of all the flowers, remained close to your place of birth. Oh how I wish to live my life like you. Your heart, exposed for the world to see, is as beautiful as the rest of you. How can I forget your stem. Hidden from the world. Under water.

Oh how Esther loved her flowers. She spoke to them. She heard them. She carried this grace till the day she left this earth.

+ + +

Helen and Mena fostered in little Esther a love for the saints. This worked well for Esther because she didn't like to speak out loud. And so, she noetically spoke to her heavenly friends. Noetically. Comes from the Greek word *nous*. Bit of a complicated word. It can mean mind, but has been translated heart, spirit, intellect. In fact, it is a very very very important word. It would take a whole other book to define it properly—and even then, books can only express so much. Well for this little eight year old, she hadn't read anything about the *nous* from the Church Fathers, the Desert Fathers or the Neptic Fathers. But she knew well what it ontologically was. Is. Whatever.

The point is, she could speak to (slash see— there really is very little difference. Yes another book would be required) the saints all around her. She felt their love for her. Each saint, like her closest friends, carried their own scent, their own beauty. Obviously, her favorite was Mama. But she loved *Mar Mena* and *Baba Kyrillos*. She loved St Marina the monk. She loved St George. She especially loved Archangel Michael. That was understandable since her home was across street from his Church. She would often stand on the balcony, looking at his church and wave at him as he did his rounds over the church.

Hi Mallooka! (That was her nickname for Archangel Michael— she was playing with the word *Malak*)

Greetings my sweet Esther.

Archangel Michael was an angel of few words. Very formal. Very strong. He loved his Esther though. He was OK with her nickname for him. After all, he knew himself to be an

intercessor for her. He saw himself as her servant. This too requires a book. Actually, no, many books. It's a mystery. Oh the honor poured upon the children of Adam, that the heavenly ones seek to serve them!

I love you Mallooka! Watch over your church! And if you have time, can you watch over our apartment building too? I mean, we're just across from the church.

Yes. At your word.

The nous. Everyone has one. Not everyone uses it.

+ + +

Esther loved going to school. Her heart was ever so full of light. In fact, one could replace the word school with anything. Esther loved going to church. Esther loved going to her grandparents. Esther loved going to the museum. The park. The store. The garden. The airport. Esther just loved. That is what happens when one keeps their petals. Innocence keeps the heart full of light.

She completed her grade nine year at the Girls Secondary School in Shobra. She didn't have many friends. Many thought her strange. She barely noticed. For Esther, school was a place of wonder and learning. She loved to absorb and process knowledge. Most humans are in exile from their hearts, and so, information is received, computed, analyzed and stored solely in the brain. As for Esther, knowledge would pass from the brain and descend into the heart. However, the most interesting thing is what happens to information once it enters the heart— knowledge is transformed, one can even say it is transfigured into wisdom. There are remnants in our language of this mystery. *I have this song memorized by heart!* Fascinating how one just accepts these sayings without taking the time to ponder their deeper truth. Yes, the heart has a memory. The heart can lead one to know things much more deeply. In fact, all real knowing happens in the heart.

Such was Esther's knowing of flowers, birds, history, languages, art... even Math. Numbers meant so much more than entities on a number line. Numbers had personalities. Numbers combined uniquely. Numbers had colors and shapes. Each number spoke to her. Each number a universe. She especially loved the numbers one, three and seven. Now, one might think that she learned her proper numerology in Sunday School. But this was not the case for Esther.

She loved the fullness of the number ONE. The supreme simplicity. She found in the number ONE both humility and greatness.

She was close friends with THREE because... well... she was in real fellowship with the Holy Trinity. It is because of the Holy Trinity that she sees in THREE the number that transcends the self-absorption of duality. The first complete shape is a triangle. THREE is holy.

As for SEVEN it carries very powerful patterns in her heart. SEVEN is new beginnings. SEVEN is completion. SEVEN speaks of weeks and their spiral— like nature and how one lives Mondays over and over again... and yet every Monday is new. Every Monday builds on the other while being completely fresh. Every Monday is a full SEVEN from the Monday before and the Monday after.

Oh and who can speak of the beauty found in the multiplication of numbers and the mysteries found in algebra and trigonometry. Such was the knowing that Esther possessed. The knowing of the heart.

But of all her awe and wonder, there was no greater found in her heart than the reverence she had for the sons of Adam. Each person, was just that... a person. Each a flower in the garden of God. She could see how each had an outer appearance, but she also knew that each had a hidden depth to them. She knew well of people's root systems and how they would find nourishment. She knew some people grew in the

sun while others needed shade. One thing that was clear to her, was that each person was indeed a window into heaven. She could see the Image of God in each person's eyes. Sometimes, she had to look harder. But she never missed it. She would look and look and look. But the moment she saw the flicker, the smoking flax, the tiniest evidence of the Image of God in someone, she would smile. And that is how she knew people in her heart. Heart to heart. Amazingly enough, most of the people her age had no clue that Esther was looking for God in them. She did this for the rest of her life.

The heart. Everyone has one. Not everyone uses it.

+ + +

In the summer of 1989, Helen and Mena announced to their daughter that they received word from the Canadian embassy that their applications to move to Canada had been approved. Mena and Helen were anxious to see Esther's response. She smiled.

Where in Canada?

We are thinking of moving to Montreal. There is a beautiful holy man there that we met last year in Alexandria. The Pope moved him to Montreal. He is a real man of God. *Baba* will be able to find work there because of his French. *Baba* and I feel like God is opening up a door for us.

OK.

And that was it for Esther. She was satisfied with her mom's answers. It was only at 3:17 AM, that she woke up startled with a thought.

Mallooka! Will you be able to visit us in Montreal?

Yes. Of course my sweet Esther.

Mama said there is a man of God there!

Yes. I know him. I know him well. He's good friends with St George and St Joseph.

Oh. One more thing. Will I be closer to you in the plane?

Archangel Michael rarely smiled. But human innocence and vulnerability were so rarely seen in the children of Adam... especially at her age. He knew the source of that innocence... the One Whose face was always that of a child and in Whose eyes all the galaxies were held and contained. And so he smiled.

Yes, my sweet Esther. I'll be very close.

She smiled too, and slept peacefully.

She dreamt of a boy. The boy was sitting on a couch. It was green. And purple. Mama Mariam was standing behind him. There were tears streaming from her beautiful eyes. The boy seemed like he was in trouble. She loved him.

+ + +

Esther found Canadians fascinating. Each family had their own villa (that is the word used for house in Egypt— since almost everyone lived in an apartment in Cairo). She was fascinated that the cars had their own villas too. Space. So much space in Canada.

Wow. Montreal is nothing like Shobra. Nothing.

Esther missed the sounds and smells of Shobra. She missed the *lamooooooooon* guy. She missed how everyone bumped into each other. She found it so strange that streets would empty out by 10 PM in their West Island suburb.

People wake up at 10 PM in Shobra.

Culture shock was an understatement. New language. New food. New customs. New everything. This made Esther— and her family for that matter— so attached to church. There was a bit of home there. OK, a lot of home there. Although people there spoke some French and English, they still knew what sandwich *beid bil basterma* was. In fact, the *Uncles* and *Tantes* all spoke Arabic 99% of the time. This comforted the whole family quite a bit. Esther found the kids at church were not as cliquey as they were at school. Esther loved them all equally.

She kept the same three friends from *secondaire quatre*, throughout Cegep and her undergrad at the University of McGill. Marina, Mariam and Mariah loved Esther because she remained faithful to her true self, she was never tempted to rebel or to stray from God. The world and all it had to offer never corrupted her simple and pure-hearted nature. Esther never lost her innocence and her deep inner beauty. It is important to note here that innocence and purity of heart are not synonymous to boring, bland and uninteresting. On the contrary, like the Lotus flower that blooms and opens up her petals to reveal her beauty to the world— Esther bloomed. She was fun and inquisitive. She was bold and fearless. Yet, she was so humble and compassionate. One could not decide whether her inner beauty could keep up with her outer beauty. Young men would gawk and stare whenever Esther passed by or entered a room. She was stunning. She was also fearfully gentle and composed. But it somehow never got to her head. Like the Lotus flower that remains close to her source, Esther too remained in her heart.

+ + +

Marina, Mariam and Mariah all felt so loved by Esther. She was a friend, a sister and sometimes even a mother to them. When she announced that she was moving a way for her Masters, they were devastated.

How can you leave us? Marina cried.

What? What about us? Where are you going to find a church like ours? Who are you going to do Midnight Praise with? Mariam cried.

As the Lord wills. As the Lord wills. Mariah wept.

It had been clear to Esther's three friends that she was on her way to becoming a monastic. There was only one path that they could imagine for her. The four of them had sat down on the ground of the women's altar at church, listening

to a cassette (an ancient device that allowed the recording and playing of sound. Ancient.) of *Tamav* Irini telling stories of *Abu Seifein's* miracles at her monastery. Although none of the girls ever told each other, the understood plan was that Esther was going to graduate from McGill, spend the summer with them and then go to the monastery to become a nun. The funny thing is that they never ever spoke about it to Esther or to each other. They just felt it.

What about the monastery? Marina said to Mariam.

I was sure she would become the next abbess of the monastery... I mean God grant *Tamav* many years... but Esther was going to take over! Mariam said to Mariah.

As the Lord wills. As the Lord wills. Mariah wept.

Esther, on the other hand, felt like there was a completely different reason for her studies in Ottawa.

Girls. I can't explain why I am being drawn to Ottawa. It makes no sense. I just know that there is a divine reason. Please pray for me.

We still have two months with you. Why are you talking like you're leaving tomorrow?

They all burst out in such innocent laughter.

Their guardian angels were in agreement— now was the time to laugh and be joyful.

+ + +

Esther completed her two year master's program in Anthropology.

Oh how she loved to study the sons of Adam.

It was early September 1999 that she began her PhD in Anthropology. She loved to study in the quietest library on campus. Fauteux Law Library.

+ + +

My sweet sweet little Esther, you are our little flower. My Son is especially fond of you. Mama said to her with tear in her eyes as she was standing behind her Elijah. He was sitting on a couch. It was green. And purple. She loved him.

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Job

The following is the account of Elijah and Esther in 42 Chapters. As one reads these types of stories, it is important to intonate in your mind (or if you are reading it out loud) the word “chapter” and then the number following it. This will help the reader keep the proper flow of the story.

Chapter 1

Focus Elijah. Haven't you learned your lesson? Martina and Mary. Martina and Mary. You don't want to do this Elijah. Stop looking Elijah. You're gawking Elijah. Snap out if it Elijah.

Esther noticed that he was staring, she looked down and graciously pretended that she hadn't noticed. Of course this held his attention even more. Elijah, like Holophernes of old, had no chance.

My sweet sweet little Esther, you are our little flower. My Son is especially fond of you. Mama said to her with tear in her eyes as she was standing behind her Elijah.

Esther remembered her dream. This was the boy who was in trouble.

Chapter 2

That day, Elijah convinced Gregory that he needed a pager so that if either one of them saw Esther they would page the other. Pagers. Little black devices with a tiny screen that often doctors carried around when they were on call. The caller

would input the call back number. The doctor would call back. Simple. In the late 1990s this became a fad. Youth who, like important doctors needed to be accessible at all times, began to carry these devices. Of course, parents loved this.

MOM! Please stop paging me to let me know what you had for dinner yesterday. I am studying.

Habibi! I paged you and you didn't answer me for almost three and a half minutes! I thought you got hit by a truck.

Accessibility. The world had no idea what was going to hit them in the following decades.

There were codes that people made up in order to communicate with each other.

Listen Gregory, page me 333 if she is on the third floor. Page me 444 if she is on the fourth floor. Page me...

Yes, I get it Elijah. Page you 555 if she is on the fifth floor. I get the pattern.

OK. Good. Page 911 after the 333 or the 444 or the 555 if there is something urgent. Like if there is another guy hitting on her. 911 me. OK?

Yes Elijah. You have officially lost your mind. I have never seen you act like this. I think you are in an existential crisis. But, who am I to say anything.

No. You don't get it Gregory. She is the one. I just know it in my gut.

Chapter 3

Esther tried not to think about Elijah. *He looks Egyptian. I wonder if he is Christian. He seemed so nervous.* She chuckled to herself. But she couldn't stop thinking about him. She had seen him in her dream. And both in her dream and in real life, Mama was there, standing behind him. He must be very special.

Lord, I don't understand, but I love you. I am yours.

Chapter 4

Operation find her name was launched. It lasted a week. Simply because Gregory and Elijah never ran into Esther during that week. Then one day, Elijah received a 333 911. He ran. Took two stairs at a time. By the time he arrived at the couches where he had first seen her, he looked completely disheveled and out of breath. Gregory rolled his eyes.

Less obvious man. You have to be less obvious.

Shhh. I can't hear them.

...

Got it! Her name is Esther.

Esther. You don't know this, but one day you are going to be my wife. Elijah was surprised at his own thoughts. *Esther.* Now he had a name.

Chapter 5

Over the last two years Esther had immersed herself in the life of the church in her new hometown. She taught Sunday School. She attended Liturgy and Bible study. She attended Grad Meeting. But her favorite was Midnight Praise.

They sure know how to do Midnight Praise at this church.

Esther thought to herself. She missed Marina, Mariam and Mariah. The people her age were nice, but they weren't very open to letting her into their social circles. The truth is that all the girls were terribly threatened by her. She was beautiful. Religious. And when they heard that she was doing her PhD their jealousy and envy was out of control.

On the other hand, all the *Tantes* and *Tetas* at church loved her.

Habibi. What is your name? Estcheer? What a lovely name. I want you to meet my grandson. He is thirty nine. Very handsome. He still has some hair. He is very Canadjan. He is daktore (that is how the word *doctor* sounds with a heavy

Arabic accent). Come sit next to me. Here, *Habibtchi*, I bought you a sandwich.

Thanks *Teta*. Actually, *Tante* Sally over there wanted to talk to me about something urgent. I'll come and sit with you next week.

Don't forget. He is *daktore*.

Yes *Teta*, I won't forget.

Esther made her way to *Tante* Sally.

Hi *Habibi*. Listen. There is something very serious I want to talk to you about. I am very worried about my son. He is lost. Completely lost. He has not come to church for long long time. You know, when he was young boy, he loved the Jesus (sometimes, when speaking in English, Egyptians would remove indefinite articles or add definite articles where they don't belong. For example, *Tante* Sally mentioned *he has not come to church for long long time*. Not a *long long time*. For example, *when he was young boy*... notice how she didn't say a *young boy*. Finally, probably the most obvious, *he loved the Jesus*).

George. George. Come and say hi to *Esteer*. This is the girl I told you about. This is my husband George.

Hi *Uncle*. Nice to meet you.

Sally. She is too skinny for *Elijah*.

Sally glared at him and pretended like he hadn't said anything offensive.

O George. I think *Abouna* is calling you in his office.

Abouna left thirty minutes ago.

George. Please. Go. Check. On. *Abouna*.

Sally was clenching her teeth.

Esther of course understood what all these *Tantes* and *Tetas* wanted. In her humility and grace, she entertained each one, knowing how heartbroken these women were for their kids. They were doing their best for them. These women felt so helpless. They loved their boys and wanted them married.

Esther became very serious to show concern for Elijah, *Tante* Sally's son.

How old is he *Tante*?

He turned twenty three last week. He is going to be lawyer. You know, the lawyers make a lot of money. But, I am so sad because he doesn't come to church.

I will pray for him, *Tante*. I will pray for him.

Try to be his friend. Maybe, you can bring him to church. He has good heart (missing the indefinite article). Anyways. He is at Ottawa U. I will pray for you to meet him.

Chapter 6

Hi Elijah. Why are you always rushing when it comes time to speak to your Mama. *Habibi*. Are you there?

Yes mom. What's up?

Habibi. I want you to meet a very pretty girl from Church. She is very...

Thanks. But no thanks mom.

Elijah cut her off.

Give me a chance. You act like you know everything.

I am not interested in your Coptic good girls.

That cut Sally deeply in her heart. Where did her little Jahjah go? Elijah knew that his words would have stung his mom. So he tried to fix it.

OK mom. I am sorry. I will give you a chance. Please tell me why you think I would be interested in this girl. What does she look like?

Well your dad thinks she is too skinny for you. But I think she is perfect. She is beautiful. She is so smart. She is doing her PhD. Her name is Esteer.

...

Elijah's heart stopped. What had his mother just said. Surely, she could not be speaking of the same person.

Elijah. *Habibi*. Are you still there?

Can you describe her to me mom?

His voice was shaking. What are the chances. *Nil*. He told himself. *There was no way that his mom was speaking of THE Esther.*

Well she is very beautiful. She is tall. Beautiful eyes. Very smart. Very humble. What do you have to lose. Come to church once *Habibi*.

Fine mom. One day. I will come.

Chapter 7

November 23rd, 1999. Vespers St Mena's feast. Esther of course attended. She loved St Mena. She went home filled with peace. She slept early. There was Liturgy next day.

Chapter 8

November 24th, 1999. St Mena's feast. Elijah decided to attend Liturgy. Till this day, he has no idea why he did.

Chapter 9

Esther did a double take when Elijah walked into the church. She was right. He was the boy in trouble. It seemed as though Mama and now *Mar Mena* were very much intending them to meet. Officially. She kept this in her heart.

Chapter 10

Elijah almost fainted when he saw her standing in the pew. Her head was covered with a veil. But it was her. He had memorized everything about her. He panicked. She was Coptic.

Chapter 11

Hi. You must be Elijah.

Hi. What's your name?

She knew that he knew her name.

Esther. Your mom told me all about you. She really loves you, you know.

Elijah wanted to die. His mom never told him that she had spoken to her. That's it. He wanted to divorce his mom. Officially. *I officially hate her.*

Yes. Of course. She is a great mom. I love my mom!

Good. She really wants you to come to church.

I do. I mean, I will. I mean... Would you be up for coffee? I mean are you going to school? Do you need a ride?

Esther smiled. She was used to this. Boys were often flustered around her. Her heart was so tender from the Eucharist that she found herself agreeing to everything. This was not her custom.

Sure. Let's pick up a coffee on the way to University.

Chapter 12

Elijah almost fell down the stairs at church from his knees buckling. He thanked God that he didn't fall. It was a long time since he'd thanked God.

Chapter 13

Elijah had an impenetrable wall around his heart. Esther, who lived from her heart had an impenetrable wall around her sacred personhood. One wall to keep everything out. One wall that kept everything in. One was the wall of Jericho. The other was the wall of the Kingdom of God. Oh the mystery found in the sons and daughters of Adam.

They picked up coffee. Elijah drove Esther to school. Elijah was taken aback by her demeanor. She was so calm and unmoved by things. She was both confident and incredibly humble. Elijah was normally confident around girls. He knew how girls behave around him. Especially really beautiful girls. He had this theory that beauty was both a blessing and a curse. He thought that girls who were beautiful simply got whatever they wanted because of their physical looks. In fact,

he felt that they knew they could get what they wanted based on their appearance. He thought this to be a disadvantage because they were deprived of challenges. Inner challenges. He felt that this made them more shallow and conceited. This judgement he had subconsciously placed on Esther—especially that she was the most beautiful human being he had ever seen in his life. Period.

She was nothing but the opposite of this judgement. She did not expect anything from him nor did she require anything from him. She listened. She asked amazing questions. And yet she felt the complete freedom and confidence to disagree and to be herself. She had never said a lying '*me too*' in her life. This threw Elijah back to the memories of his first moments of inauthenticity with Martina. He remembered that he was willing to be someone else in order for Martina to like him. He did this constantly. Esther on the other hand, seemed like she could care less what Elijah thought about her. Not in an apathetic way, but she just seemed to be so comfortable with herself. She wasn't bowing at his altar. She had no problem speaking about her faith. So openly.

And you're doing your PhD? Elijah found himself asking incredulously.

Yes. Why does that shock you?

Well you seem so... what's the word... you seem so religious.

Esther burst out laughing. If by religious you mean that I love God and carry Him in me everywhere I go? If by religious you mean that I am His and He is mine? If by religious you mean that I love Him and His creation with all my heart? Then yes. But what does that have to do with my PhD?

Well. I don't mean to be rude, but science and philosophy clearly leave no room for the existence of a God. I mean, really, who in their right mind ACTUALLY believes in a guy up

there (Elijah said this while pointing up with his index finger).

Esther smiled. And there wasn't a drop of judgement, presumption, pride or deceit. She simply spoke— the mind and the heart in perfect unison— and made a perfect confession.

I do.

She didn't feel the need to go into deep socio-political, economic, philosophical and anthropological arguments for the existence of God. She knew, that He could only be encountered in the heart. She wasn't interested in communicating to Elijah's brain, but rather she knew ontologically that the Lord just IS. He is the I AM WHO I AM. He had no need of anyone to explain further. He is.

I do.

Esther repeated.

Elijah could not argue. He had nothing to say. Nothing to argue. Deep silence filled his brain. He was unnerved at how he was unable to answer her.

OK. Well then. That settles that.

Yup. It sure does.

Elijah drove Esther from the coffee shop to the University completely silent. He had nothing to say. Esther seemed to him to be in a completely different world. As though she didn't realize that she just shook him to his deepest core. She, like her God, was so present. Here and now. Elijah dropped her off. Awkwardly mentioning something about hoping to see her around at school. She responded about hoping to see him at church. That was it.

Elijah paged Gregory. 911 911 911.

Chapter 14

Esther loved being downtown. Everyday on her way to the University, she would do her rounds with the homeless. There

was Rip and Fay. There was Animal. There was James. She was especially fond of James. She would get off the city bus, go through the Rideau Centre to get to Rideau Street. She would search for anyone that looked like they could do with a sandwich and a drink. She loved to share her own lunch and experience hunger for the sake of solidarity with the homeless. Maybe that's why George had found her too skinny for Elijah.

Rip and Fay were a couple that had chosen to live on the streets. Rip had the deepest blue eyes and was missing a number of teeth. He loved his wife Fay. Esther wasn't sure if they were officially married, but he called Fay his wife. She was the wild one of the two. She seemed to Esther to have been a woman of deep suffering. Esther not only shared her lunch with them, but she would stop and listen to them. Sometimes, she would buy her flowers to warm up Fay's day. She would smile at her. Look deeply into her eyes. And say.

You are a flower in God's garden. Don't forget it Fay. Don't you forget it.

Me? Fay would answer humbly. I am not a good person like all your church goers.

You are so beautiful Fay. These flowers are called Tiger Lilies. They are bright and orange. Fiery. You see these black markings they have on their petals. They give them their character and are part of their beauty. Just like the difficult aspects of our lives, they form the dark spots on the petals of our lives. They make us beautiful.

Fay would invariably be comforted and encouraged by Esther's visits.

Animal was another of Esther's favorites. He used to be a chef. Animal was always there to protect Esther. He was at least six foot five inches. Anyone that would so much as bother Esther in any way, somehow Animal would be there. How he knew was always a mystery to her. Like that one time,

when she was stuck in an alley. Someone had blocked her way and seemed like he was up to no good. And then Animal, literally out of nowhere, showed up and placed his hand on his shoulder. The man turned around. Looked up. Almost wet himself. No one knew that of course. And ran away.

You are the best, Animal!

Esther Ma'am. Anything for you. No one messes with our Esther Ma'am.

She loved that he called her Esther Ma'am.

In fact, there was something about him that reminded her of her *Mallooka*. A man of few words. He felt honored to protect her. He saw himself as her servant. In fact he loved to serve everyone. One time, she had given him her lunch. It had a couple of sandwiches, an apple, a banana and bottle of iced tea. He thanked her for it and ran off. By the time she had crossed the road, she had found the apple, banana, the iced tea and one of the sandwiches in the hands of four different homeless people. She knew that Animal was a protector. And a sharer. She understood that these flowers, the broken, the marginalized, the ones whose petals had been marred by dirt and forgotten, had the ability to give freely, much more than the comfortable flowers. She knew— all were flowers in God's garden. But she was especially fond of these flowers.

And then there was James. Her favorite. She loved them all equally of course. She just loved James more equally. James was the most vulnerable person she had met on the streets. He had the mind of a ten year old. He was so simple. He used to cry when he heard of anyone else's suffering. He would jump for joy at the success of any one around him. He was probably in his fifties. Teeth were all gone. And oh how he loved his Esther. She was the sweetest person he had met on the streets of Ottawa. She often had a hard time gifting him with anything.

Thank you sweet Esther. I just ate. I am sure someone else needs it more than I do. I have so much. I couldn't possibly take any more.

Then he would smile as though he had a full set of teeth. All he had was a full set of gums. Esther would just melt in his presence.

Do you know who I am named after my sweet Esther (he would ask her almost every week)? I am named after James the Less. One of the disciples of Jesus. You know what my sweet Esther, I sometimes wish I would have been worthy to be born at that time and be a disciple of Jesus. But look at me. I am just a poor beggar. I am no one.

Esther looked at him and saw only His Beauty... the beauty of her Crucified Lord. She placed her hand on his shoulder. Inwardly she prayed.

My Jesus, thank You for letting me put my hand on Your shoulder. Thank You for letting me gaze at Your beautifully tired eyes and Your toothless smile. Thank You.

She then spoke to James and said.

My dear James. If only you knew how close the Lord is to you. It would have made the disciples envious of you.

Chapter 15

Gregory responded to the 911 911 911 immediately. It was a 911 after all. In those days, there was no ignoring 911s. Gregory could hardly believe what Elijah was telling him.

Say that again. Go slowly. You were where? Church? Why? Actually, who cares why. SHE WAS THERE?

Yes. Isn't that absolutely crazy! Not only was she there but... are you ready for this?

Spit it out Elijah!

Gregory. Shame on you. You can't rush these things. OK. Are you ready for this?

Gregory almost walked away.

OK. OK. I'll tell you. We spoke! That's not all. I gave her a ride from church! I bought her a coffee... Gregory. She knows my name!

Elijah. Get it together man!

She is amazing. Her only flaw... honestly... her only flaw is that she actually believes in God. To be honest. I think I can live with that. As long as He doesn't get in the way.

Elijah. You are talking like she likes you already. You gave her a ride. That's it.

She is going to be my wife. I am going to marry her. You'll see.

Gregory was sure that Elijah was going to marry her. He knew him well enough that whatever he put his mind to he would accomplish.

Chapter 16

There is always something so beautiful about the pursuit. There is something about a young man who chivalrously seeks to win the heart of the princess. He seeks to be heroic. To protect the young damsel. To show her through great feats of love that he is worthy of her affection.

The thing with princess Esther, is that her heart was already won... not by Elijah. Her knight in shining armor was her Yassou3.

Habibi Yassou3. Habibi Yassou3.

Her heart repeated her Beloved's name often. He had wooed her. He had protected her. He had shown her the greatest heroic feats. And, to put it simply, she was in love.

Yet, Esther found herself incredibly intrigued by this Elijah that had Mama's favour. And so she daily prayed for him.

Somehow, this boy in trouble had mysteriously entered her heart.

Chapter 17

Elijah started attending Wednesday Liturgies only to drive Esther to University and to buy her a coffee on the way. This made everyone happy. It made Sally happy. This made Esther happy. This made Elijah happy. All for very different reasons. Truth be told though, Esther was beginning to look forward to her drives with Elijah.

Lord. What is it about this boy in trouble. I somehow see a little child inside of him. But he is completely oblivious to this little child. It's like I can see You in him, like I can see You in James, Rip, Fay and Animal. I can see You in Elijah. Why does he have such walls? Lord. Not only can I see You, but I am beginning to see myself in him.

Elijah. What is your favourite flower?

Esther. I don't know the first thing about flowers. I guess the rose?

Oh really. The rose. And why do you like the rose?

Esther was smiling. She loved how hard he was trying.

Well. The rose is beautiful. The rose symbolises love. The rose protects herself with thorns. The rose is solitary... Um... the rose is...

She burst out laughing. She almost spilled her coffee.

Watch out! You spill your coffee and you are going to have to pay big bucks for the high end interior of my 1989 Chrysler Reliant!

This made her laugh. It made him laugh as well. It was the first time that he found the courage to joke around with her and not just be a fumbling fool and try to impress her. She felt his confidence. She liked it. He felt his confidence. He liked her.

OK, what is your favorite flower?

I absolutely love the Lotus flower.

Why?

Well, she opens herself up for the world to see... and yet her roots and stem are hidden in water. She always remains close to her place of origin. The Lotus, is a flower of the heart.

Chapter 18

Elijah took a week to locate a Lotus. It was his first heroic act. He brought it to church on the following Wednesday. He was so nervous after Liturgy. It was now the third or fourth week that she had been getting rides with him to University. She got into the car. He looked at her. She knew something was up because he looked like he was going to pass out from nervousness. She found him incredibly cute when he was nervous. He pulled out the Lotus flower. He handed it over to her and mumbled something about how he had found it and that it wasn't a big deal.

Esther's heart, like the Lotus, opened up without ever leaving her place of origin.

Chapter 19

Their Wednesday morning Liturgies, coffees and drives became something of a weekly ritual. One week, Elijah mustered up the courage to ask her if she was going to Liturgy on Friday mornings as well. Esther smiled and said.

Yes. I go Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays.

Chapter 20

After Friday morning Liturgy, Elijah having attended of course, asked Esther if he could drive her to University. She smiled and said.

I would love that. It beats taking a bus. Although your K car does take a lot longer to warm up in the winter.

She had made fun of his car. It was glorious. He felt like he was in. They were becoming friends. Obviously, Elijah wanted

much more. Esther knew this. She didn't know what she wanted. She just decided to not close any doors to this boy who was in trouble.

Chapter 21

Wednesdays and Fridays turned into Wednesdays, Fridays and Monday evenings for Bible Study. Gregory was concerned.

Elijah. Help me understand. How can a girl bring you to church three times a week? What is wrong with you man?

Listen. It is a small price to pay for being around her. It's just so easy to be with her. She is SO different.

He instantly thought of Martina. Actually, Esther reminded him of Martina in a strange way. How was it that Esther, a PhD student had the same innocence of a grade seven girl.

Gregory. I hate being at church. All the *Tantes* and *Uncles* think I had some sort of conversion. I just endure it so I can drive her home or to school. I live for those drives.

I am surprised that she is letting you drive her. Surely she gets that you are into her.

I am not sure! I don't even know if I want her to know that I am into her. There is actually something so cool about our friendship. It's weird. All I know, is that she has totally captivated me.

Chapter 22

Christmas holidays came. Esther went to Montreal for a few weeks in order to celebrate both *Kiahk* season and Christmas on January 7th. Elijah didn't go to church when she was gone. He was depressed that he couldn't see her.

Chapter 23

Y2K. December 31st, 1999. Elijah was nervous that the whole world was going to break down just like they were predicting. He went home for the holidays. His parents had

planned for the great crash in the stock market, the electrical outages and the collapse of society because of their entrance into the new millennia. Elijah's biggest concern was that he wasn't going to see Esther again.

Y2K. Nothing happened.

Nothing at all.

Elijah woke up on January 1st and made his new year's resolution.

This is the year that I am going to win Esther's heart.

Chapter 24

Esther had spent the night in a *Kiahk* praises and an all night vigil that ended with a Liturgy. It was now 5 AM and she was so joyful and energized by the prayers.

How beautiful are your ways O Lord. Far beyond comprehension.

Mama. Your boy in trouble has entered my heart. I am not afraid to love him. I just don't understand why him? He acts like he doesn't believe in you or your Son. He pretends to come to church, but I know that he is only doing that to spend time with me. And yet... I have felt you pushing me towards him. I am not afraid.

Habibi Yassou3. Your love makes no sense. My love for Elijah also makes no sense. But all I know, is that Your pursuit of him is evident. I am not sure what my role will be, but I am open. I am Yours. You have me. All of me. Just, please never leave me. And please always watch over your Elijah.

I AM.

Chapter 25

Second half of January, when she returned, Elijah also returned to church. Their rides resumed and their conversations grew deeper and deeper. Esther's innocence and calm completely disarmed Elijah. She had complete

access to his soul. A place he had not visited for a long time. They were becoming kindred spirits.

Elijah. Tell me about your childhood.

Oh wow!

Elijah had not gone there for over ten years. He could never have expected what would happen to him as he answered this simple question. But little Jahjah exploded out of him and adult Elijah had no chance to deal with what hit him.

He spoke of robins and trees. Earthworms and church. He spoke of Mama smiling at him as he lit candles. He spoke of Pac-Man and he spoke of *Uncle Onsi*.

WHAT IS GOING ON???

Adult Elijah was panicking.

By the time he had finished telling her about Martina, his experimenting with drugs, his break up... they both were in tears. He looked over at her. He had no words. He was dying to tell her about *Uncle Onsi's* last words to him. But he didn't. He just sobbed.

I am so sorry. I have not allowed myself to think of my childhood for years. I am such a fool. I am so sorry.

Esther prayed.

Thank you my sweet Yassou3. Thank you. Thank you for giving me a glimpse of his heart. I know You are pursuing him. I know You are calling him.

Elijah. Please don't apologize...

She, overwhelmed with compassion, felt her heart tearing as she sat and watched him discover the loss of his innocence. His story, like everything that Esther learned and processed, entered into her own heart. And there she stored it. Deep into her heart.

Please don't apologize. Elijah. You...

She paused for what felt like five minutes. He couldn't look up.

Elijah. You are beautiful.

Chapter 26

Elijah didn't show up to church for the month of February. He felt embarrassed. He felt like a monster compared to her. Although he was madly in love with Esther, he couldn't bring himself to hurt her. Just speaking about his selfishness with Martina, made him realize that he had the ability to hurt this beautiful flower called Esther. They weren't even dating. Neither had expressed the desire to pursue a romantic relationship with the other. They were just friends. Good friends. And yet, Elijah was terrified of hurting her as he had Martina and Mary. He never told her about Mary. He just couldn't. He saw himself as a monster. A monster that wasn't sure he could change.

Esther. You deserve to be around much better people than me.

Elijah spoke to Esther— even though she wasn't there.

You deserve better.

He poured himself in preparing to write his Bar exam in June.

Chapter 27

March 9th is *Baba* Kyrillos' feast day. It was a Thursday. Esther loved *Baba* so much. She attended the Liturgy of his feast. She, however, found herself spending the majority of the Liturgy talking to *Baba* about Elijah.

Baba, you know he has a good heart. Please take care of him. Just pray that he repents and returns to the fullness of life!

Don't worry sweetest Esther. Just like you are our little flower, Elijah is one of ours.

Esther didn't hear *Baba's* response, but somehow, at that moment she felt at peace. She received his response in her heart, but without the words. In fact, words always come after the encounter, and are there to help define the experience. One could even question whether *Baba* ever said those words,

or whether he just communicated directly to her heart. In the end, Esther received a confirmation from heaven of Elijah's special place to the heavenly ones.

Chapter 28

Elijah not only avoided church, he avoided the third floor altogether. Gregory didn't know what was going on, but he was definitely worried about his friend. He had assumed that he was completely rejected by Esther. That she had finally broken it to him that she wasn't interested. He even speculated that Esther was becoming a nun based on how often she was going to church. He assumed the worst. He could have never imagined that it was Elijah himself, for the first time in a decade, who was protecting another person from himself.

Hi. My name is Esther. I have seen you with Elijah. Is he OK?

Gregory was caught off guard. He had come down from his studying to the third floor just to take a break. Esther had come from behind him and asked him about Elijah.

Hey. Yes of course. Esther. Yes. Elijah. He's... yeah. He's OK. To be honest... I am a little worried about him. Did things not work out between the two of you? It's Gregory by the way...

Gregory. Nothing ever happened between us. But if you think I am the one who pushed him away... that is not what happened at all.

Hmm.... So you are saying he is avoiding you on his own? Did you upset him?

I don't think so. I am not sure. He just stopped coming to church. I haven't seen him for over a month. Can you please pass on a simple message to him?

Of course. Definitely!

Can you please tell him that I miss him? Can you also please tell him that he does not need to be a solitary rose but

that I see in him a beautiful Lotus?

Gregory had no idea what she was talking about. But he knew Elijah would know.

You have my word.

Chapter 27

Gregory passed on her message. Verbatim. The following Wednesday, Elijah was at morning Liturgy.

Chapter 28

Esther and Elijah resumed their conversations, coffees and drives. Elijah decided to try and see himself in the way Esther saw him. Identity. It's all about identity. He realized that he actually had no idea who he was. He just knew that he liked himself around Esther. She seemed to bring out the best in him.

Esther. I was wondering if... well... I thought maybe...

He took a deep breath.

Esther. Would you like to go out for dinner this Friday evening.

Esther smiled. She looked down. She did this often. It is not that she was shy. It is that she often looked into her heart. There is a connection between the metaphysical heart and the physical heart. And so Esther looked down, would speak a wordless prayer to her Beloved. She would know how to answer from this place. It was the seat of her personhood. She smiled.

I totally understand Esther if you don't want...

I thought you would never ask.

Like I was saying, if you don't want to... What did you say?

I said. I thought you'd never ask. I would love to.

Elijah was through the roof excited. *What does a flower like her have to do with a brute like me?*

Chapter 29

Vittoria Trattoria. Downtown. Elijah opened the door for Esther. He pulled out the chair for her. They sat face to face. This was different. They were used to side by side conversation because they were always in the car. This was different. A bubble formed around them. Their two guardian angels hovered over them. The tips of their wings often touching.

Face to face. It was pleasant for them to look into each other's eyes. Laughter. Silence. Tears. Concern. Compassion. They all gushed out that evening like the waters of Trevi's fountain. There was one thing that gushed out the most powerfully. Love.

Time, when experienced through the analytical mind is experienced as a sequence of events. *Chronos*. Time as death. Time as the enemy. Time that must end. But Elijah and Esther were not experiencing time as *Chronos*. They entered into what is called *Kairos*. Time as life. Time as an upward spiral. Presence. Here. Now. Kingdom time. Elijah's heart was beginning to open up. Esther had that effect on him.

Esther spoke to him about her childhood. She spoke to him of her memories of Egypt. She spoke to him about flowers. She spoke about her parents. This made Elijah realize how poorly he treated George and Sally. And at the same time, he wished that his parents were more like Helen and Mena. He understood where Esther came from. She spoke to him about *Mallooka* and *Mar Mena*. She spoke to him about Mama. She didn't tell him about her dream. Heaven hadn't given her permission to share. Something happened inside Elijah as she spoke about Mama. A pain that ached his heart seized him.

It's not like I believe in You Jesus. Nor do I plan on believing in You.

He didn't realize that by virtue of communicating with Him, he had in fact acknowledged His existence.

As for you Mama. Oh how I wish you did exist. But I just can't believe in fairy tales. How can Esther speak so confidently? How can she speak with such certainty?

The walls that he had built up around his heart, through years of academia, years of sin, years of luxurious living, formed in him a real blockage. For now, he just enjoyed being around Esther.

The night eventually came to an end. Three hours and forty seven minutes of *Chronos* to be exact. An eternity in *Kairos*, to be even more exact. Appetizers. Entrees. Desserts. They were the accidentals of the evening. The main course was the care and love they had for each other. But, unlike Martina, and unlike Mary, Elijah was terrified of approaching Esther physically. He didn't even dare to reach out for her hand or even consider trying to give her a small kiss on the cheek. She, like the garden of Eden, had angels with flaming swords protecting her. He dared not approach. There was an unspoken understanding. And yet, they had arrived at the restaurant as friends and left something a lot more akin to soul mates. Their souls were somehow being knit together.

Thank you Elijah for this evening.

Thank you... I am not very good with my words... but I...

Elijah. You don't need to say anything. I understand. I feel the same way.

As they were walking back to Elijah's car, both lost in their own thoughts and feelings, the silence was shattered by a deep voice yelling.

Esther Ma'am!

They both turned and found a homeless man running towards them. He was a very big man. Tall. Very tall.

Instantly, Elijah felt threatened. He looked down on homeless people as leeches in society. He was about to tell the man to back off— and then all of a sudden it hit him. He called her by her name. He looked at her and was about to tell her to be careful. But she had already started to run in his direction.

Animal! What are you doing out so late?

She gave the man a big hug. Elijah was stunned. Eyes bugging out. Mouth opened.

Well, I just wanted to make sure you were OK yourself Esther Ma'am.

I am fine. I am more than fine. This is my... good friend Elijah.

Pleased to meet you sir. Hope you are taking good care of our Esther Ma'am. She's special to us you know. She's very special.

Elijah could not speak. He simply nodded.

That night when Elijah got home, he could not sleep the whole night. What was happening to him. Who is this Esther Ma'am who stole his heart, and the hearts of all those who met her?

Chapter 30

Gregory felt like he had been thrown by the wayside. But being the good friend that he was, he was truly happy for Elijah. He saw in him what felt like the beginning of a great transformation. He was far more joyful. He was in a better mood. He was way more willing to concede in arguments and discussions. There was an edge that was somehow magically being smoothed out. He knew that Esther was the cause.

It was the end of the summer and Elijah and Esther had spent every day together. Literally. Every. Day. That is, every day after he finished his Bar exam in June. They went for walks. They went biking. They had picnics. Elijah joined her at church often. His mom couldn't be happier. The *Tetas* and

mothers of other single young men were devastated. What Sally felt was beyond words. She lit candles in front of *Abu Seifein's* icon in order to thank him for bringing Esther into Elijah's life. Elijah was quiet at church. He didn't know how to be. It was strange for him. But he showed up.

It was the last week of August and Gregory threw a question at Elijah that he was not ready for.

So. You two are inseparable. So when are you going to pop the big question.

What question, Gregory?

You're kidding right? *THE* question.

We don't even hold hands yet and you want me to propose? How does that make sense?

Are you telling me you aren't absolutely in love with her?

Of course I am. But, marriage?

Gregory had planted a seed in Elijah's mind. A seed that would take almost a year to come to life.

Chapter 31

Elijah's life plan wasn't completely off course. Sure, he did his Bar exam six months later than he expected. Sure he didn't move to downtown Toronto. Sure he wasn't working in a big Bay Street law firm. But he was now a full fledged lawyer. He worked long hours. But thanks to Gregory, he worked with a purpose. He was saving for the ring. And so he laboured and laboured. He saved and saved.

Chronos somehow crept into the hearts and minds of humanity in that first year of the new millennia. Time seemed to fly by. It's like there was no holding it back. September to December flew by. And Elijah worked and worked.

January 2001, Elijah went to Montreal to meet Esther's family. Mena and Helen were so loving. They welcomed him into their home as their own son. Of course, they were concerned about Elijah's *resistance* to God, but they trusted

Esther's judgement. If this was the boy that Esther was bringing home, they knew that there must have been so much prayer involved.

Elijah admired how Esther did not change one bit while she was at home. She had this strange ability of being the same person all the time. He thought of how much he changes around his parents. Did he ever admire her and love her.

Tante Helen made all the typical Christmas feast food for them. They prayed. They ate. They talked all night. It was so peaceful. Elijah felt honored that they were going to be his family. Although it was his first time meeting them, he went aside and spoke to *Uncle* Mena.

I want you to know *Uncle*, that I only have honorable intentions towards your daughter. I love her very much.

I can tell. I can also tell that she loves you very much too.

I know that I don't deserve her.

Elijah was beginning to get emotional. He was nervous. He didn't know how to bring it up. So he decided to just speak frankly and get straight to the point.

Uncle. I am planning on proposing to Esther next August. I am almost done saving for the ring. And to be honest, there is no one in the world I would rather be with. I know it's the first time that we meet, but I wanted to be honest with you and let you know my intentions.

Elijah. It is very honorable of you to speak so frankly with me. Of course you have my blessing. Can we pray and commit this all to the Lord?

Elijah bowed awkwardly and shut his eyes.

Lord Jesus. I commit into Your beautiful hands the lives of these two young people. Both Elijah and Esther are your precious children. You love them both more than we can ever understand. And so I trust in Your will in both their lives. I ask You to protect them, I ask You to bless them and to lead them into a life of consecration to You and Your kingdom. We love

You *Habibi Yassou*³. And hear us when we pray with thanksgiving. Our Father, who art in heaven...

Elijah found himself bowing his head, closing his eyes, and praying. He tried not to think too much about it. He did feel some form of peace.

Chapter 32

The ring was purchased. The proposal was planned. He was ready. It was terribly difficult to spend the following months not sharing everything he was planning for the proposal with Esther. One day, Esther decided to pop her own question to Elijah.

So Elijah. What are you afraid of? Why are you afraid of committing your life to God?

Elijah was caught off guard. But fear was exactly what he felt.

Well. Not sure where this is coming from. I mean, I have been coming to church with you whenever you ask me. Whenever you pray, I bow my head and follow along. When you share scripture passages with me, I sincerely listen and try to take it in.

That's not what I am asking. I am asking you why you are hesitant to give yourself completely to God.

For starters, I am not even sure He is there. But let's just say He is there, I have read the New Testament many times. He promises tribulations, suffering, a cross and ultimately calls us to die.

Yes! In order that we may truly live! Don't you see Elijah? We can only live and experience true freedom when we surrender to Him?

How can you say freedom and surrender in the same sentence? Don't you hear yourself?

Elijah was terrified. This felt like their first argument. Esther was more assertive than she's ever been. And yet there

was absolutely no hint of violence in her tone. She just spoke of the deepest and dearest places of her heart.

Elijah, I want to share everything with you. Everything. You have to understand, Jesus will always be number one in my life.

Elijah wanted to be first in her heart. He was afraid. He hated not being in control. He hated the thought of depending on someone else to have control of his life. He remained quiet. However, it was his great love for Esther that kept him open. He had been running. Running from God. Running from his childhood. Running from heaven. He looked at her. He could tell she had more to tell him. So he put his head down. He could have never expected what she was going to say next.

Elijah. My love. Look at me. I want you to know that God sees you and knows that you belong to Him. You are one of them. Elijah. You belong to heaven.

Uncle Onsi. How could she possibly know what Uncle Onsi had told him?!?

Esther was just repeating the truth that she had received from *Baba Kyrillos*.

Elijah. Don't spend too much time running. Remember. You are one of them. Heaven is waiting.

Those last words hit Elijah like a ton of bricks. He was seventeen again. He was walking down the street. He was stumbling from his first time smoking up. A taxi car pulls up in his mind. He could see the street light. He could see *Uncle Onsi*. His last words.

Don't spend too much time running. Remember. You are one of us. Heaven is waiting.

Chapter 33

The following weeks, leading up to the proposal in August of 2001, were heaven for Esther. Her Elijah, her beautiful Lotus, was opening up to His Maker. He was so tender. She

wasn't sure what made him open up so much, but she knew it was genuine. He never told her about *Uncle Onsi*. They prayed together. They talked about everything spiritual. Many times Elijah found himself falling short of Esther's spiritual stature. He wondered why she had chosen him. It was a mystery. Something of the grace of God. It was easy for him to give thanks to God when it came to Esther. Although Elijah was opening up to God, He was still just an idea to him. But at least he was opening up.

Elijah loved reading Songs of Solomon with Esther. His background in English and his deep love for poetry, made him love reading it with her. He couldn't believe this stuff was in the Bible. She would share with him how she saw the love of God for them. Even when we didn't deserve it.

I am dark but lovely.

Songs 1:5

Oh how he could relate to that verse. That was the summary of his feelings towards God and towards Esther simultaneously. He loved how the Shulamite, when deprived of her beloved went out barefoot, without a veil running into the streets seeking the one she loved. *That was good imagery.* He thought. He loved how she had become love sick and how crazy one becomes for love. Esther loved this and understood it deeply. She knew that the human soul should hold nothing back from the pursuit of their love for God.

Esther herself was blooming in a completely new way. She still couldn't understand why these things were happening, but somehow, the veil between heaven and earth was slowly, but surely, being removed from her eyes. She began seeing angels and different saints at different times and in different places. *Mallooka* would visit. *Mar Mena* would visit. *Mama* would visit. She didn't understand this sudden outpouring of

grace and visitation from heaven. How could she have known. In the end, heaven always remains a mystery. She could not tell Elijah about these visitations as he would think that she was hallucinating or schizophrenic. She was just getting closer to heaven. That's all.

Chapter 34

Wednesday. August 22. 2001. The feast of St Mary. Elijah hadn't slept since Monday night. He couldn't. He was so nervous.

What are you so nervous about Elijah. You love her more than yourself... What if she says no?

Elijah was most concerned about her reaction because deep down inside he felt like she SHOULD say no. He couldn't believe or accept that she, Esther, the most beautiful human being in the world, should say yes to him. It felt upside down.

He kept going through the proposal in his mind all of Tuesday. And Tuesday evening. And well, Tuesday night till he left his place in the morning for early Liturgy. He had planned a whole day with Esther. He told her that he had a day off on Wednesday and not to plan anything because he wanted to spend the entire day with her.

She was clueless.

They stood together for Liturgy. He never did that. But that day, he felt compelled to stand next to her— even if he would get in trouble by *Abouna*. It was worth it. He prayed the whole Liturgy for one thing, and one thing alone, that she would say yes. He had imagined every moment of this day for over three months. His plans became more and more intricate. And then finally one day in mid July, he decided to just focus on Esther and think of what she would want her proposal to be. This changed everything. Elijah, for the first time since he was in grade seven, actually loved someone more than himself.

It really has nothing to do with you Elijah. Nothing... Mama happy feast. Can you please cover me with your veil today. It's a special day. I know I haven't been a good person over the last while... OK for the last fifteen years... And even now I am struggling. But could you please be with me today? Thanks Mama.

After communion, Elijah grabbed the blessed bread from Abouna and avoided eye contact with him. He did the classic grab and go. This was a classic move done by many when they were avoiding questions about being late, or how long it's been since their last confession, or worse... if they were going to be pushed into teaching Sunday School. This time, Elijah wanted to avoid being questioned about standing on the "girls' side". It worked.

Esther on the other hand felt like Elijah was not acting like himself. They hadn't even spoken and she could feel like he was nervous about something. They got into the car, of course Elijah opened the door for her. He was giddy.

What's going on? Elijah, you are not acting normally.

What? Can't a man be excited to spend a whole day with his beloved?

Esther smiled. She knew he was referencing The Song of Solomon when he called her that.

OK. Beloved of mine. What are we doing today?

Elijah, still parked at church, smiled and handed Esther a card. On it was written the number One. It was fancy. Esther also noticed the hand drawn Lotus flower on the back of the envelope acting as a seal. She smiled. She felt so loved.

I thought you would never ask? I have planned every moment of this day together. All you have to do is enjoy it. Now open the card.

It was a hand drawn card of a basket with five loaves and two fish. Elijah was so talented. She opened the card and it read.

My dearest Esther,

I am so in love with you. I am so excited to spend the day with you. Today is about being together— the three of us. That's right, Jesus, you and me. Our theme for the day is love! Just love! I have planned for us to spend a day going deeper in our love for each other.

First things first. Let's eat! Happy Mama's feast. And as we have been fasting for the last two weeks, today we feast! We are going to a little breakfast place just outside of the city. You are going to love it! While we are driving, I thought it would be nice if you could read for us the first chapter of Songs of Solomon.

Love,

Your dark but lovely Elijah

*Just a quick note. If thoughts of whether it was right or wrong for Elijah and Esther to eat non fasting foods on St Mary's feast because it was a Wednesday, it may be better to just close the book and put it aside. Elijah's story is not for the faint of heart or the strong in judgement. For how can the friends of the Groom fast when the Bridegroom is in their midst. Oh, and how He was in their midst.

Esther was so deeply touched by all the love that Elijah had just poured on her. From the details of the hand crafted card to the special message he wrote for her. But the one thing that stood out for her, was that Elijah was willingly and honestly involving the Lord in their relationship. Oh how her heart exploded with light and joy at the growth she was seeing in Elijah.

Elijah.

That's all she could say. A tear crept out of her eye as she smiled. Elijah was happy.

Oh Esther you have no idea what I am planning for you. Elijah thought.

OK. Take out your Bible and read chapter one while I drive us there.

Esther read. At times she would choke up. And when she would compose herself, she would continue reading. She burst out laughing at verse 7.

Tell me, O you whom I love, where you feed your flock?

So... where are we going to eat?

Elijah loved her playfulness.

Esther. You are going to have to wait and see.

They arrived at the Miller's Oven in Manotick. It is a quaint little tea house where breakfast is served hot and fresh. They had breakfast together. Tea. Scones. Eggs. Sausages. Chocolate croissants. They had a beautiful time. Elijah took the time to ask Esther many questions.

What is the one thing you think I should improve on?

O Elijah. Why do you ask me such questions? *Behold you are perfect my love.*

She was quoting Songs of Solomon again. That is what happens to those who immerse themselves in Scriptures.

I am serious, Esther. I want to know what would make me a better human being.

Elijah. It isn't about being better. It's about being you. Who you are in heaven's eyes. That will only come when you descend, become a child, trust in your belovedness... and then you can begin to be human.

She looked to Elijah like she wanted to say more. But instead, she looked down. She smiled. It drove him absolutely bonkers when she did that. Bonkers in a good way. It was so

attractive. She was so humble. So meek. She looked up and continued.

Elijah. Like an infant, completely dependent on their mother in the womb, so must we become with God. It's not about improving or getting better. It's about becoming human. Being. Earth.

Esther's mind went to the etymology of the word humility. It comes from the word *humilitas* which means from the earth. *Humus*, the Latin word for earth. She knew that all Elijah needed was to become humble... grounded... earth. For some strange reason, Elijah understood everything she said. But the word earth descended into his heart.

He remained quiet for a little.

He then pulled out the second card and handed it over to Esther. She smiled. Opened it. Admired the beautiful hand drawn tree. She opened it. It read.

Beloved Esther,

How about that breakfast? I am hoping you enjoyed it. The next leg of our date, I decided needs to be outdoors. I have prepared a picnic for us. But we will have to earn our lunch by going for a nice long hike in Gatineau Park around Pink lake. The scenery is so beautiful— especially that fall seems to be very early this year. Trees are beginning to change colors. And I know the perfect spot for our picnic. I have chosen this part of our day because I know how much you love nature. Your love for nature comes from your love for the Creator. During our drive, can you please read chapters two to five. I love you Esther. I love you with all my heart.

Your Elijah

Esther quietly looked at all the details of the card. She was evidently moved and taking it all in. There was a deep stillness in her. She took out the Bible and read chapters two

to five. She read them for the first time in her life towards both Elijah and the Lord. It is important to understand something about Esther. She never saw herself getting married. She never imagined that she would love anyone in a romantic way. She always saw herself as belonging only to heaven. She had read Songs of Solomon several times— and each time was SOLELY for Jesus. This was new. Although she had loved Elijah already for over a year, romantically that is, there was something happening on the inside. She saw in the Songs of Solomon something of her love for Elijah. This caught her off guard. But it made sense. This was all part of His logic for her life. She knew intuitively and deeply that she was offering her life for Elijah. Not just to Elijah. It was as much for Elijah, as to Elijah. This little distinction is the very movement of Christ to the Church His bride!

For being determined to give Himself up for the life of the world.

Esther thought of that line in Liturgy. It came to life for her... actually it was becoming her life.

That makes so much sense. You, Lord, are calling me to give my life for the life of Elijah. In so doing, I am walking like You. In fact, it must be Your love for Elijah that you are enfleshing in me. Habibi Yassou3. There is no one as beautiful as You.

Elijah, on the other hand, could never have guessed what she was thinking of. Instead, he was still stuck on their conversation earlier. *Humus*. For some reason it really caught him off guard. He told himself that he will have to dig much deeper into this later.

No pun intended. Digging? Earth? Elijah you are ridiculous.

For some reason, they were both practically silent for the whole 2.4 km hike around Pink Lake. It took over an hour and a half. Both seemed to be captivated by the beauty of nature. Silence was only broken when one would point out something beautiful to the other.

Elijah. Look at this leaf. Doesn't it look like it's on fire?

Esther! Watch out! You almost stepped on mister caterpillar. Look how green he is.

Otherwise, the walk was silent. Before they got back to the parking lot, Elijah pulled out the picnic he prepared. They sat down at the highest point of the hike, looking out onto the lake. It was absolutely breathtaking. *Mortadella*. Boursin cheese. A French baguette. Sliced. A bottle of red wine. Some black olives. Baby dill pickles. Heaven.

Elijah, took the time to prepare little mini sandwiches for Esther. He clumsily spread the cheese on the baguette bread. She took in his effort. She was loved. She gave thanks for Elijah. An unknown yes was forming in her without her even imagining that this was all part of an elaborate plan to propose.

They watched the sun set on the lake. They now knew why it was called Pink lake. Stunning. It is strange how the sunset somehow always brings up thoughts of death.

Esther thought to herself.

Is that why we pray the litany of the departed at Vespers?

Not what your typical 25 year old would think of when watching a sunset. But she was Esther.

You know Elijah, we are not going to live forever.

I can't handle that thought right now. You are my life! Let's talk of other things. Please

Of course.

My dear Elijah, you belong to heaven. He is your life. Lord, do whatever it takes for Elijah to know You as his Life.

Right when they got into the car, Elijah handed Esther the next card. He turned the car cabin light on for Esther.

My Beautiful Flower Esther,

Our last stop for tonight is the place of our first date, Vitoria Trattoria. It was there that my heart opened up for the first

time in years. It was there that I knew that in you I found so much more than just a friend— I found in you that evening a confidante, a soul mate, a kindred spirit— I found my best friend and love of my life. That night you touched parts of my soul that were isolated for years. You loved me through my vulnerability. You didn't judge me. That night you opened me up to God. Though I am still so far, but it was your person that made Him possible again in my mind. That night, I saw your great love for all of humanity as you hugged Animal. I knew that I had found the most precious flower in God's garden of souls. Esther, I love you with all my heart. Tonight, let's take time to talk about our past. Our present. Let's dream about our future.

With all my love.

Your Elijah

Esther took it all in. It was easy for her heart to store this information since it was communicated directly from Elijah's heart. Heart to heart. The easiest way to communicate. That evening, Elijah ordered the same thing that they did that first night.

Chronos once again was defeated. Time as Death, died.

Kairos ruled that whole day. In fact, *Kairos* was born in Liturgy, and Elijah and Esther managed to hold on to him all day. *Kairos* is always born in Liturgy. In *Kairos*' defense, he is available twenty four seven— so funny to be describing *Kairos* using *Chronos*. Maybe this will make more sense: *Kairos* is always available— always pregnant with the potential of Kingdom time. All this may be confusing because words always fall short when describing the things of the heart and the Kingdom.

They talked. They laughed. They got super serious. They wept. That night was even more special as they spoke of their future dreams. Elijah thought to himself.

I would be the luckiest man in the world if I got to accompany Esther on just one of her dreams! Lord, help me. I am so nervous.

Dinner was finished. Dessert was enjoyed. They got up and made their way to the door. He opened the door for Esther of course. They stepped out and started walking towards Elijah's car. Esther reached out and grabbed Elijah's hand... for the first time. Elijah almost had a heart attack. It was the first time she had so much as touched him. Now... now she was holding his hand?

Elijah. I can't even tell you how thankful I am for today.

Elijah couldn't breathe. He had been holding his breath since the first moment she held his hand. Elijah had been physical with Martina and Mary. Why was he having an internal convulsion at holding her hand? Why was the fabric of his being imploding? Esther. That's why. It was Esther.

Well, my beloved, there is still one more thing left for this evening.

Elijah, it's getting late. You have done so much today. You have your big case you have to prepare for tomorrow.

Elijah didn't answer. He simply handed her a card.

He let her take it out of its envelope.

Wait. Don't open it.

Elijah went on one knee.

Now you can open it.

It read.

Dearest Esther,

Will you marry me?

Esther's vision was blurred. Tears came rushing. Elijah was kneeling before her. He had a box with a diamond ring. It was beautiful. He was beautiful. She fell to the ground in front of him. She grabbed his face and through her tears, placed her

innocent lips on his... and she kissed him. She pulled back. She was barely able to speak. She whispered.

Yes.

Elijah on the other hand had not recovered from her holding his hand. And now the feeling of her lips on his, though it was for a fraction of a second, wounded him with love and intoxicated him. Grace.

Tears exploded from his eyes.

Both were kneeling in front of each other in the streets of downtown Ottawa.

Both were sobbing.

Both completely oblivious to the world.

They stayed up till 5 AM talking.

They held hands.

Kairos was victorious one more time.

Chapter 35

The following morning, which was only one and a half hours after Elijah dropped off Esther back to her apartment, he was back in the office. There was a big case they were working on, and seeing that he was on the lower rungs of the firm, a lot of the grunt work fell on him. He could hardly notice that he was being taken advantage of. The truth is that when one takes a day off, they only find double the amount of work on the following day. Yet, Elijah felt like he could conquer the world. Somehow, he was more efficient, more focused and more productive on one hour of sleep compared to his normal eight hours. The reason was simple— she said yes.

That evening both Elijah and Esther told their parents about their special news. George hardly noticed what his son said. Sally almost fainted.

Mom? Mom? Are you there?

Oh *Habibi!!!* I am so happy for you. *Habibi*. *Abu Seifein* answered my prayers. I promise you *Jahjah...* I have been fasting Wednesdays and Fridays for the last five years for this moment. *Ashkorak ya Rab! Ashkorak!*

You would have fasted Wednesday and Fridays anyways...

Elijah caught himself. He was going to criticize her. He stopped himself.

Well, Mom, Esther is the daughter you've always wanted.

George, why aren't you saying anything?

Sally. Is that the skinny girl? Is Elijah talking about the really skinny girl from church?

Hi Dad. I am still on the phone...

Elijah could hear Sally whispering to her clueless husband.

Say *mabrook ya* George. Just say *mabrook*.

Mabrook Elijah. As long as she doesn't get in the way of your career.

Elijah remembered why he didn't talk often to his parents.

OK. Mom. Dad. I have to go. Listen, I want you to take my birthday off. I want to take you to Montreal to meet her parents.

OK *Habibi!* Please, light a candle in front of *Abu Seifein's* icon.

Elijah hung up. His parents were clueless.

Esther's conversation with her parents, on the other hand, was so different. They both expressed such sincere joy for Esther. They expressed their approval and their commitment to continue praying for God's will in her life. Before they hung up, they prayed together. She let them know of their plans to come down on Elijah's birthday in September for them to meet his parents. They were overjoyed.

Nehemiah, Robert and Gregory were so happy for him. Nehemiah and Robert couldn't wait to meet her.

Chapter 36

The following weeks were busy at the firm for Elijah. Yet both Esther and he were in total bliss. They would talk for hours everyday. They would meet for Liturgies, go for walks and hang out as often as they could.

Elijah was nervous about bringing his parents to Esther's place in Montreal. The truth was that he was so embarrassed of his parents. Actually, he felt like his mom would be fine. It was his dad that he was concerned about.

He lives in a different world, Esther! He barely even knows me!

Don't worry Elijah, my parents will love them. Most importantly, they already love you so much.

This comforted Elijah quite a bit.

Chapter 37

September 10th, 2001. The night before Elijah's birthday. It was decided that Esther was going to drive with George and Sally because Elijah got called into a meeting in the morning. He was so annoyed because he had booked it off three weeks prior. His parents were going in the early morning, and so Esther decided to go with them. He would catch up in the afternoon.

This comforted Elijah quite a bit.

Chapter 38

September 11th, 2001.

6:47 AM— Elijah arrives at Esther's place. Her whole place smells like roses. Almost like incense. He can hear her through the door having a conversation with someone. He doesn't understand. He can only hear her responses. *Of course I love him... Whatever he wants... I understand... I understand...*

You know Mama, I've never said no to him... I just need to know that you will take care of him... I understand... of course... let it be done to me according to your word.

7:23 AM— Elijah and Esther arrive at George and Sally's. Elijah quickly greets his parents. He gives them strict instructions on appropriate topics of conversation and defines the rules of engagement. He doesn't think they will follow a single thing he told them. Esther looks deeply into his eyes, hugs him tightly and gives him an incredibly gentle kiss on the cheek goodbye. Elijah didn't notice the tear forming on her left eyelid. He was too busy worrying about how his parents were going to ruin everything.

7:34 AM— Esther, George and Sally head out to Montreal in their new 2001, Honda Prelude. 1 driver. 2 passengers. 3 guardian angels.

7:59 AM— American Airlines flight 11 departs from Boston's Logan International Airport, bound for Los Angeles. Aboard are 11 crew members and 81 passengers, including 5 hijackers.

8:14 AM— Flight 11 has its final routine communication with air traffic controllers. Sixteen seconds later, controllers instruct the pilot to increase the plane's altitude. However, there is no response, and all subsequent messages are unanswered. Investigators believe the plane is hijacked around this time.

8:21 AM— The transponder on flight 11 is turned off, making it difficult for air traffic controllers to monitor its course.

8:33 AM— Esther, George and Sally make their first stop in Alexandria. George fills up on gas. Esther and Sally go to the washroom. George buys a coffee for the road.

8:42 AM— George, Esther and Sally get back on highway 417 East towards Montreal.

8:43 AM— Esther calls Elijah on Sally's flip phone. Elijah's sees his mom's number and doesn't answer.

8:44 AM— A second flight attendant on flight 11 is on the phone with air officials and reports that the plane is in "rapid descent" and that it is flying "way too low." The call then abruptly ends.

8:46:40 AM— Hijackers on flight 11 fly the airplane into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. The impact occurs between floors 93 and 99. The crash instantly kills hundreds, including all those on board. Almost immediately emergency responders are sent to the building.

8:54 AM— Elijah hears about the first plane that crashed into the World Trade Center. He can't believe what is happening. He fears that this will mean war. He has a distaste for George W. Bush.

9:03:11 AM— Flight 175 crashes into the South Tower of the World Trade Center, striking between floors 77 and 85.

9:04 AM— The world is in shock. Elijah is internally panicking. He knows that Esther and his parents are hundreds of kilometers from the tragedy, but his stomach is in knots. He can't explain why.

9:07 AM— A drunk truck driver merges onto the 417 East towards Montreal.

9:08 AM— Esther smells an intense fragrance of roses for the second time that day. She braces herself. She says one last prayer for her parents and for Elijah.

9:11:33 AM— The drunk truck driver swerves into a 2001 Honda Prelude. Three guardian angels are greeted by Archangel Michael, *Abu Seifein* and Mama. The Lotus flower that is Esther, gently folds her petals outwardly and breathes her last. Sally and George also were killed on impact.

9:37 AM— Elijah received a phone call from Constable Jeff Martins.

9:38 AM— Elijah falls to the ground. Unable to process, he simply groans and weeps. Elijah is no more.

10:07 AM— Elijah is driving to the scene of the accident.

11:11 AM— Mena and Helen call Elijah. They are weeping. They are concerned for him.

11:33 AM— Elijah arrives. They have already taken the three bodies. He tries to speak. He finds himself unable. He is not sure if it is his tongue or his brain that won't cooperate.

1:47 PM— Elijah sends a text message to Gregory.

Greg. Parents and Esther got hit by drunk driver. All three dead. I am no more.

Chronos ruled Elijah's mind that day.

Chapter 39

Elijah doesn't know what happened from September 11th till September 17th. Shock. He found himself dressed in a black suit. Standing in a church. Three coffins. He was unaware of the world around him. People he didn't know were all around him telling him that they were in a better place. He wanted to yell at them. But he wasn't sure he knew how to speak yet. So he opted to remain silent. In fact, he hadn't spoken a word since 1:47 PM on September 11th. Elijah vaguely remembers his three friends Nehemiah, Robert and Gregory standing next to him at the funeral.

He could not give a eulogy.

Both Mena and Helen spoke about Esther. Every word was unbearable to Elijah. He was disintegrating.

After the funeral they took the bodies to the cemetery. This was the part he was unable to face. He hadn't left Esther's side since he was first allowed to see her. She had said yes. She was going to be his wife! She said yes! He was committed to her. If she left him, he was not willing to leave her.

They sang an awfully mournful tune at the cemetery as they brought their bodies to the freshly dug holes. The

pallbearers struggled to lay the coffins on the green ropes that were the lowering mechanism. Elijah could only stare at the Lotus flower he had placed on Esther's coffin.

Prayers were said. Again. Sand was sprinkled. And the dreaded lowering began. Elijah was going to jump in with Esther. He had decided that he wanted to disappear into the earth.

Earth.

Elijah had a flashback of the proposal. He could feel everything. See everything. As though he was at the Miller's Oven in Manotick. He was looking into his sweet Esther's face. He could hear her voice.

Elijah. Like an infant, completely dependent on their mother in the womb, so must we become with God. It's not about improving or getting better. It's about becoming human. Being. Earth.

Earth.

He wanted to disappear into the earth.

When they started lowering Esther's coffin, Elijah found himself doing the strangest thing. He took off his shoes. He stood barefoot. It's like he had this hunger to feel the earth beneath his feet. He wanted to touch the earth that was going to embrace his Esther.

Mena and Helen came to him. They seemed to be doing so much better than him. They hugged him. Helen whispered to him.

You will always be our son. We love you and will always be here for you. Our Esther loves you very much. This we know. And now, she will be praying for you and loving you even more perfectly than she could have ever loved you here.

She was perfect. She IS perfect.

When everyone left, Elijah stood on the mound of dirt next to the hole. He stood there barefoot. Then he grabbed the shovel and began to bury her himself. The workers stared at

what looked like a crazy man frantically and maniacally shoveling dirt over the coffin. At a point, Elijah discarded the shovel and was on his knees shoving the dirt into the hole with his hands. He wanted to feel the earth. He wanted to become the earth. He wanted to fulfill her last words of advice to him.

Elijah. Like an infant, so must we become with God. It's about becoming human. Being. Earth.

He did the same for his Mom and Dad's grave. He was officially an orphan and a widower. In one fell sweep. He was thrown into infancy. He had no one. Becoming earth was not an option.

That evening, Elijah came back to the cemetery and slept on the fresh mound of dirt. He wanted to be close to his Esther. After all... she was going to be his wife... she had said yes.

That night he dreamt of *Uncle Onsi*. He dreamt of flowers and trees. He dreamt of planes and towers. Cars and trucks. He wept in his dreams. He wept and wept.

Chapter 40

Gregory was concerned for him. He hadn't returned since the funeral. The following day, Elijah came home to find his three friends, Gregory, Robert and Nehemiah sitting in the living room. Elijah was covered in dirt from head to toe. He was a sight to behold.

Elijah looked at three friends and became keenly aware at how little each could possibly offer him. Each took on their iconic role. Gregory represented Philosophy. Robert represented Entertainment. And Nehemiah represented Hedonism. Philosophy, Entertainment and Hedonism— his three friends— what could they possibly offer Elijah. Nothing. And so, Elijah that day decided to forsake all three. Too long had he depended on them.

Esther my love, I am going to become earth. I will listen to you. I will become like an infant before God. I will completely depend on Him. Not sure what you can hear and see now, but I remember your stories of Mallooka... I am hoping you can do the same. In any case. I am done with these three.

He didn't say a word to them. Each tried to comfort him. Each of his friends exposed his deep poverty when faced with the concreteness of death and life. Elijah only remained silent.

They thought he was still in shock. They were worried that he had gone mad.

He was worried that they were going to continue in their madness.

He left his apartment with the clothes on his back. Never to return.

Chapter 41

He went daily to the cemetery. There he would chat with Esther about what she meant about becoming human. Becoming earth. Esther was quite silent these days. And so Elijah continued in his new found deep silence.

Chapter 42

Finally, Elijah decided that he needed to deal with his parents' home. He decided to sell everything and give most of it away. He did not do this in order to fulfill some religious or Biblical commandment. He just saw no use for anything.

He spent a lot of time in the backyard, hugging the trees, feeling their bark, listening to the stories of the squirrels and robins. He mostly listened to the earthworms. He understood from them his own journey into the earth.

He sold the house. But only after he had sold the Atari for \$198. He got that price because it was only played once.

Psalms

Elijah had taken very little with him from his parents' home. One thing that became a very good friend of his was the *Agpeya*. The book of the hours. The Greeks call it the *Horologion*. They often make everything sound fancy and attractive.

Do you want to pray the Agpeya?

No.

Do you want to pray the Horologion?

Ooooh. Sounds amazing! Sign me up!

Elijah carried his *Agpeya* with him everywhere. The Psalms somehow communicate the heart. They became his narrative. His heart was in so much pain. In fact, Elijah only had access to heart. His brain was taking a break.

*Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty.
Neither do I concern myself with great matters,
Nor with things too profound for me.*

*Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul,
Like a weaned child with his mother;
Like a weaned child is my soul within me.*

*O Israel, hope in the Lord
From this time forth and forever.*

Psalm 131

O Lord. Is this what Esther was speaking about? Lord You know that nothing means anything to me anymore. I have been made like a helpless little child. All taken away from me. No mother. No father. No Esther. No sweet Esther. From this time forth, O Lord, and forever... I will only hope in You, O Lord. Make me earth O Lord. Make me the earth that Esther spoke about. I am humbled like a beast. All stare at me like I am crazy. O Lord. The house is empty. I sleep on the floor. Like a child I sleep in Your arms. Are You my mother too, O Lord? The new owners will come next week. Where do you want me O Lord. I will not allow my heart to be haughty... in one moment all was taken away from me. I can't lift my eyes up. I don't think of things too profound for me. Earthworms. I am a worm and not a man. Make me earth.

+ + +

*One thing I have desired of the Lord,
That will I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
All the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord,
And to inquire in His temple.
Psalm 27:4*

O Lord. Tomorrow I will be without a home. The whole world is Your home I suppose. Can I move in with you? I want to behold

your beauty O Lord. Your face O Lord I will seek. Just don't hide from me.

+ + +

*When my father and my mother forsake me,
Then the Lord will take care of me.*

Psalm 27:10

Lord. Been there. Done that. I have no parents. Please take care of me. It was quite hard to settle with the lawyers, the new home owners and hand over the house without saying a word.

Here I find myself. Alone with You. Tag. You're it. My parents forsook me. You take care of me.

+ + +

*Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and
all the depths;*

*Fire and hail, snow and clouds; stormy wind, fulfilling His
word;*

*Mountains and all hills; fruitful trees and all cedars;
Beasts and all cattle; creeping things and flying fowl.*

Psalm 148:7-10

With the money Elijah kept aside from the sale of the house, he decided to buy himself a new house. Not what most people would have thought of— but an abode of sorts. In order for Elijah to become earth— for that was his new obsession— he needed to be free like Mr. Cardinal. And so, he decided to buy a 15 passenger van and gut out the back and turn it into his home. He named his van Greg. For it would become his new friend.

Elijah had not showered since the day of the funeral. In fact, he was hoping that the earth from Esther's grave he had

acquired all over his hair and hands would never leave him. He now donned a decent amount of stubble. A really good pre-beard. As for his hair... well, one could say that he was in the ugly stages. Not long. Not short. But he just couldn't care about his appearance. He told himself.

Mr. Cardinal and Mr. Earthworm never commented about my appearance. So why should I care.

He chuckled when he thought of the guys at work... with all their suits, ties, shiny shoes.

Work!?!

That was the first time he thought about the firm. He had just stopped showing up at work after September 11th. Of course, the good people at work didn't mind for the first few days. And then they started calling his little flip phone, which died after a few hours. Elijah never bothered to charge it. He still had it, but seeing as he was in silence, he found no real need for it. After a couple of weeks of trying to reach him, the firm just decided to hire someone in his place.

The truth of this world is that it keeps spinning whether you are there or not. Everyone is replaceable. Everyone.

Elijah thought about this deeply.

Everyone except for Esther. O Esther, no one could ever take your place.

O my sweet Elijah— this was the very first time Esther was granted permission to answer him since she was in heaven— I wish, Elijah, I could share with you the Light and the Love that emanates everything that is! He is the One, Elijah. He is the One that is the only Irreplaceable One. Do you not see it Elijah? He is all around you and in you! Warmth. Love. Light. In Person!

Elijah heard nothing. Of course. One may ask why do the saints then speak? They speak to us because we are a community, members of the same Body, because He truly made the two into one— which is heaven and earth. The heavenly speak to the earthly all the time. Even though Elijah

“heard” nothing, every cell in his body heard. His soul heard. His spirit heard. Just not his ears. In fact, the trees around him heard, and they bowed in worship every time Esther mentioned Him. The squirrels, the earthworms, the cardinals and robins... all the creation around Elijah heard Esther, and they all in their own way bowed in worship at the mention of Him. Even the rocks, though accused of being inanimate, each had a frequency, a vibration as it were at which they expressed themselves... well they too, at the very mention of Him, broke out into a different frequency— known as the frequency of praise! That’s an actual thing. That is why Jesus said if the sons of Abraham should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out. He meant it.

Interestingly enough, everyone and everything operates at different frequencies. Sadly, only the sons of Adam can choose the darker, more sinister frequencies to live in. Causing pain and disharmony with all that is created. If only one could align themselves, if only one could attune themselves to the frequency of the Spoken Logos of God. Then Elijah would see and hear as a real Son of Adam was created to see and hear. All of creation awaits this moment— when a son of Adam becomes a son of God. Attuned.

+ + +

*He sends out His command to the earth;
His word runs very swiftly.
He gives snow like wool;
He scatters the frost like ashes;
He casts out His hail like morsels;
Who can stand before His cold?
Psalm 147:15-17*

Elijah quickly learned about the cold. Now mid-October weather was definitely not as cold as February in Ottawa, but

it was enough for Elijah to begin asking the big survival questions.

How am I going to survive the winter in this metal van? Couldn't I buy a Styrofoam van? Why don't they make those? Tell me Greg, why are you made of the most cold conducting materials? I know. It's not your fault.

And so, Elijah spent the last two weeks in October solely focused on how to make Greg winter ready. He would work very intensely all day, covering the entire back of the van with an insulating foam, creating a propane based heating system, covering the outside of his van with a heat-absorbing paint. These would be enough to maintain the temperature in the van to above zero throughout the winter.

He also bought a good sleeping bag.

His days would go by very quickly. In fact, he was really feeling the days getting shorter. He wished that Mr. Sun would slow down. Since his childhood, Elijah personified all of creation. Mr. Cardinal. Mr. Earthworm. Mr. Squirrel. It was only when he grew up and became sophisticated that he objectified the whole world around him, rendering creation into a thing to be used, abused or consumed. Now that he was becoming earth, *stupid* sun became Mr. Sun again. These subtle changes in the heart of a human help with his frequency problems.

Elijah liked daytime. Mr. Sun helped a lot with that.

+ + +

*I am weary with my groaning;
All night I make my bed swim;
I drench my couch with my tears.
My eye wastes away because of grief;*

Psalm 6:6–7a

In the evenings, he would sit and remember his pain.

+ + +

*When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,
What is man that You are mindful of him,
And the son of man that You visit him?*

Psalm 8:3–4

Elijah spent less and less time in the Walmart parking lots—where he was used to parking— and more and more time in the country. He had a spot, by the Ottawa river, where he loved to park his car on warmer evenings. He would climb on top of Greg and lie down in the dark staring at the stars.

Hi Esther. My love. My dove. My perfect one!

The Songs of Solomon reference would spiral him down the different memories of their dates reading this most beloved poetry book.

I am dark but lovely. Right Esther? Now that you can see all my sins so clearly... do you still love me?

...

Right. You are in your own deep silence... I keep forgetting. I keep thinking you are just away on some vacation. That you are coming back to me.

...

Look at me now! Is this what you meant by earth? I look at the stars and all I feel is small. Tiny. Insignificant. Like Mr. Earthworm. Is it true? All these galaxies are just an expression of His love for us? I mean, that's a lot of time and space. Millions of light years away. Please tell me that that is not where heaven is. Maybe that is why I feel so alone? But no. I know you are close. I remember more and more of my childhood. I remembered the

other day, how Mama used to smile at me in the icon. That must mean that she was close. Right?

Is my rambling bothering you? I really hope not.

So... what do you think about Greg? Do you like what I've done with him? Speechless hey? I know. I am pretty impressed myself.

Elijah laughed at his own joke.

Well. Esther. I feel small. I am all alone. Now what?

My Beloved Elijah, your heart must become like the deepest valley. You must become the lowest place on earth.

Elijah remained quiet. For some reason, images of a dry river bed came to him. Then images of deep sea beds, all dried up began to form in his mind. Then he imagined an ocean bed, completely dried. It's depth immeasurable. All of it earth. Somehow, he understood that he needed to become the earth at the bottom of this deep valley.

What a weird thought to have. Oh well... Esther, I've been wanting to tell you that I am as much in love with the Psalms as I am with the Songs of Songs. Seriously. All the Abounas, all the Sunday School servants, all the Uncles and Tantes who would tell us to read the Agpeya. Wow. Were they ever right! I feel like the Psalms are rewiring my brain and reorganizing my DNA. They really feel human. Raw. Earth. I remember also hating the Agpeya as a middle-schooler. Boring. That's what I used to call it. Boring. How ignorant!

Well now, I love it. I figured you would be happy about that. Don't think I didn't notice you slipping away every few hours. I knew you were praying. Once you were coming out of the washroom and you were putting away your little black Agpeya in your purse. Busted. I didn't want to embarrass you. But I noticed, my love. And now. Look at me. I would have never imagined. A homeless wanderer, Agpeya praying, van dweller. Speaking of which, I am sorry I have to go, I need to pray my Compline Prayers. I mean, you are more than welcome to join me... only if you want.

Elijah stood that night, on Greg's roof, looked up to heaven and prayed. And prayed. And prayed.

Every time he said '*Doxa Patri, ke Eiyo, ke Agio Epnevmati*' both Esther and Elijah would cross themselves and bow deeply before the Creator of the stars.

+ + +

*O God, You are my God; early will I seek You;
My soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You
In a dry and thirsty land where there is no water.
Psalm 63:1*

Oh Lord. I am that dry and thirsty land. I really am. Come and visit me. My soul thirst for You. My flesh longs for You. I am dry earth.

+ + +

*Be still, and know that I am God;
Psalm 46:10*

And so, Elijah became still.

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Proverbs

Elijah sat in silence. Elijah sat in darkness. This silence and this darkness were of a physical nature. They were provided by his dear friend Greg— the van not the person. In fact, Greg became one of Elijah's great teachers. For, Elijah, since he was in grade seven, had begun living in his head. He was a floating blob of ideas. In a weird kind of way, he was unaware of his body. Now this may all sound strange, but Elijah discovered all this in his silence and his darkness. In Greg.

When one lives in utter luxury and comfort they forget the reality of hunger, thirst, pain, exhaustion. They lose their physicality. They have no need, and so... they can get lost in their thoughts. They can't read the cues given to them by their bodies. They are unable to survive. This is exactly what Elijah was discovering. Having finished insulating Greg, Elijah quickly discovered in his free time that he actually knew very little about how to live as a human being. He knew very little about how he was going to survive. He discovered that he knew very little about himself.

Elijah. Today, I am confidently calling you a fool. Oh don't be hurt. This is in fact a great discovery. Elijah. You. Really. Know. Nothing...Period.

Elijah was quite used to talking to himself at this point. When he had completed praying all the Psalms in the *Agpeya*, he still found himself awake and aware for several hours in the day. It was in these times that Elijah began to ponder what

it means to be human. What it means to survive. In fact the main question he sought to answer was— how does one live WELL in the world that God created? And he quickly discovered that he knew nothing. Now for most people this would be depressing. For Elijah, this was an incredibly joyful discovery. He was somehow becoming that dry valley he had seen in his mind's eye.

Elijah. You used to walk around thinking that you knew everything. And yet, even an ant has more wisdom than you. She labors day and night to prepare for winter. She does not lose herself in her ego. She is not lost in thought. She labors without thought for herself. She labors for the community! Elijah. Learn from the ant. You are such a sluggard. Get up. Feel the snow under your feet. Experience the cold. Learn! Elijah. Seek wisdom!

And wisdom he did seek. He wanted to know, not in his head, but in his body, what it meant to live well as a human before his God. Too long had he been stuck in his head going from one stimulus to the other, from one entertainment to the other. He quickly discovered that the silence and the darkness were expressing the state of his soul! But isn't that it... he was realizing the deep intertwining and connection of his body and soul. Psychosomatic. Those Greeks... they have words for everything. Soul-body.

Elijah, at the age of twenty-five, began his incarnation.

+ + +

Elijah began by spending hours observing everything around him. He observed his body temperature at different times of the day. He observed how certain foods made him feel. He observed how at different times in the day his energy would spike and dip. He observed how his facial expressions would somehow imprint on his soul. If he frowned long enough, he found his mood would become somber. If he smiled long enough, his demeanor, his mood, his being would be filled

with light. He observed how sitting affected him, how standing changed his perception, how kneeling created reverence in him, how lying down prepared him for rest. He observed how opening his hands, palms up helped him to be opened to receiving. He observed how closing his fists brought him to a place of being closed and agitated.

Elijah also began to observe his breathing. Short repeated breaths, in and out, would sometimes help him to wake up. Slow deep breathing, especially in the darkness, helped him with stillness. It would help quiet his thoughts. At times he would follow his breath and see the oxygen's journey to the different parts of his body. He became aware of all the members of his body. He was no longer estranged from himself.

Interestingly enough, he was no longer afraid of hunger. For the longest time Elijah was an avid meat eater. Ribs. Steak. Wings. Cold cuts. Sirloin. Burgers. You name it. He loved his meat. For some reason, he found himself unable to come near it after the accident.

Esther. What's the connection? Why have I become a vegetarian? I don't know, but it seems to me that I can't bring myself to eat another living thing... at least living beings with souls. I look at Mr. Cardinal, I can't eat him. I don't even crave meat like I used to. In fact, hunger no longer scares me. I look back and think, I can't believe how much of my life I have spent eating. Now, a head of lettuce, some bread and some hummus satisfy me for a few days. It's probably because my biggest fear was to lose you... and well... you know what happened... you were there... and well... I am still alive and I feel somehow that you are with me. I mean, I have no proof. But I am not afraid anymore... By the way, Esther, did you know that you were going to leave me? That morning, when I was coming to pick you up, I heard you talking to someone. The way you looked at me when you opened the door... I was blind then, but now that I have all this time to

observe... something tells me that you knew that you were leaving me.

Yes, my dear Elijah. I did.

Elijah, sitting in his deep Greg darkness, quieted his thoughts, breathed deeply and smiled. He opened up his hands, palms up, and accepted— rather received with thanksgiving— the deep knowing that was being communicated to him by Esther. He knew that she knew. He observed how this made him feel. He observed the peace. He slept well that evening.

+ + +

The next day, as was his custom, Elijah got dressed and went for his morning walk. No matter the weather, Elijah would go for a two hour walk in the forest. He had parked Greg next to a beautiful ten kilometer path in Gatineau Park. Elijah's journey of becoming earth was beginning to focus a little more on acquiring the wisdom to live well before his Maker. It was the forest that communicated to him the most about this ability to live well. Elijah had always loved trees. He would often spend ten or fifteen minutes just studying a tree. This studying was very physical. He would look at, touch, smell and even taste the tree. Somehow, he would even listen to the tree. He started giving his own names to the trees. A birch tree for example received the name Angel tree. All birch trees were now Angel trees. Birch was no more. For scattered throughout the forest, these white Angel trees looked like guardian angels for the other trees in the forest.

Yes. You shall now be called Angel trees. And you, O great and tall Angel tree at the heart of the forest shall be called Michael—the Archangel tree.

It wasn't only Elijah who was pleased by naming the trees, it was the Angel trees themselves who were equally joyful to have a son of Adam give them a name again. For too long had

humans named the created world without much understanding. Giving unintelligible Latin names to the created order. *Stupidogobius*. *Turdus Maximus*... Cold. Meaningless. Inanimate. It's no wonder humans stopped talking to trees, stopped hugging them, stopped seeing them. Trees became for consumption. Pac-Man. *Homo consumus*. Something physical changed in the Angel trees in this specific forest. For Elijah, like Adam, was beginning to live well around the trees. For giving a name to a living being, was very much a real participation in the original image in which Adam was created. The image of the One who Is. The One who made Angel trees.

The whole forest was awakening because of one human. Solomon trees. Joshua trees. Esther trees. Oh... how Elijah absolutely loved Esther trees. Strangely enough, the first Esther tree he saw, was right next to Michael, the Archangel tree. All these and many more trees were awakening. Elijah, too, was awakening.

Wisdom. When Logic takes flesh, the whole cosmos awakens.

+ + +

That night, Elijah dreamt of the glory of the Tree of Life. He walked among the trees in Eden... there everything was awake — awake with His glory. He didn't want to wake up.

+ + +

Elijah began writing down what he was learning. Here is a small collection of the innocent and simple wisdom that was making its way into Elijah's heart.

- + Never drink after a meal, it stops digestion.*
- + Make friends with hunger — he will protect you from drunkenness.*
- + The flavor of your food is not important for life.*
- + Enoch tree (Cedar) tea is perfect for when you are sick.*
- + Take the time to look around you, everything is speaking, everything is alive.*
- + Speaking makes you a fool. Listening makes you wise. Even to trees.*
- + Yoga is not from the Creator.*
- + Remember that you actually know nothing about anything.*
- + Nothing is forever. One thing dies so another may live. Nothing is lost.*
(Elijah wept as he thought of the new life he found because Esther had died.)
- + Hug an Angel tree when afraid. Hug an Esther tree if you are tired.*
- + Never hug a girl. Especially not from behind when you are pushing her on a swing.*

- + *Luxury and ease of life dull the senses and lead to unhappiness.*
- + *One cannot live in the past or in the future. One can only live in the here and now.*
- + *Wisdom is found in how you live not how you think.*
- + *No such things as perfect romantic getaways... crap happens. Literally.*

(Elijah died of laughter when he wrote this specific one. He could see himself waddling like a penguin running to the bathroom in Costa Rica.)

- + *Complaining fills one with death and darkness.*
- + *Giving thanks to the Creator fills the mind and heart with light.*
- + *Selfishness and the ego must die in order to live.*
- + *Be small in all things.*
- + *All sins come about when you lose the memory of the Creator.*
- + *Awe and reverence for God is the beginning of Wisdom.*

These sayings did not need to be written on paper. They were the incarnate wisdom of his personhood. Earth.

+ + +

Mama, Archangel Michael and Esther loved to watch over Elijah as he slept in his van. Esther loved to pray Midnight

Prayers with him. Mama loved to tuck him in. Archangel Michael made sure his guardian angel stood guard over Greg.

+ + +

Since Elijah had begun to recognize that wisdom was to be incarnate— lived out in his body— he added to his notes.

+ One should stand while the Gospel is being read.

+ One should do the sign of the cross every time the Holy Trinity is mentioned.

+ One should fast before receiving the Eucharist.

+ + +

Elijah found himself becoming more and more efficient in his daily routines. He had a daily routine that afforded him time to pray, read scripture, go for walks in the forest, eat and learn from the world around him. By the end of the winter, he had already granted names to all the trees, shrubs and plants. He had also given names to the winter animals he encountered in the forest. Foxes received the name Herod. Deer received the name David. When he encountered a majestic stag— Elijah fell to his knees and whispered... *Yeshua. Yeshua... you are truly king of the forest.* The stag that had been standing still, his head high and steady, the moment Elijah said *Yeshua*, he bowed his head, stretched his right hoof forward and bent his left knee. This too is wisdom. That day he wrote.

+ At the mention of the name of Jesus... every knee should bow.

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Ecclesiastes

One morning in May, Elijah having prayed his morning prayers, was walking in the forest. Spring was in full bloom. Birds were chirping, bees were buzzing, Angel trees were budding and Elijah was humming. He sat at the foot of an Esther tree to rest.

Esther, can you believe I survived this winter? You know... right before I met you I had made a life plan for myself. I was going to be a big shot partner in a Toronto Bay Street firm. I was going to own a Ferrari. I was going to be super rich... And then... I met you and you had to come and ruin everything!

Elijah burst out laughing. He thought of how happy he was sitting under his Esther tree talking to his Esther. He sobered up very quickly at the thought of what his life would have looked like had he not met Esther. He shuddered. He would have had everything he wanted. He would have achieved anything he had put his mind to. He thought of his pursuit of wealth, status, fame... he thought of how cold and meaningless his life would have been.

Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

He played out the rest of his life based on his original fallen trajectory. Loneliness. Emptiness. Dissatisfaction. Always grasping for more. Never satisfied. Then he shuddered the moment he pictured his own death and his ultimate encounter with God. Elijah had a deep, deep reverence and fear of God. The good kind of fear. He knew that all would stand before God's throne and give an account of their lives.

Each soul would stand in the light of their Creator... nothing to hide behind. It felt like a metaphorical cold bucket of ice water emptied on his head. It was there that he asked his future self— what he called dead Elijah— to speak to him from his vantage point.

Dead Elijah, what advice would you give me?

Dead Elijah answered.

Vanities of vanities. All is vanity. Only Love escapes vanity. Nothing else. Only Love will stand.

You see, death is the great equalizer. When the sons of Adam pursue anything but God, they will find that it is like chasing the wind... trying to grasp an illusion. The Hebrew word for vanity is *havel*— actually at its root it means smoke or vapor. Pursuing anything but Love is like chasing after a vapor. Meaningless. Intangible. Of no essence... for it is only God who IS. What shall it profit a son of Adam, if he gains the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what will a son of Adam give in exchange for his soul? Smoke. All a vapor. All an illusion.

Elijah understood on the one hand that he had been spared this vanity because of Esther's sacrifice. Her love was truly not in vain. He would make sure of that. On the other hand, he understood how one tiny, minuscule shift in direction would cause his trajectory to end in utter vanity... outer darkness... gnashing of teeth.

Only love escapes vanity. Everything else is havel... a vapor.

+ + +

Elijah fell asleep at the foot of his Esther tree. The great Archangel Tree called Michael towered over him. He dreamt of a man. He was slender. Tall. He had a head dress made of eagle feathers. He seemed to be standing in a different forest. A forest that had many more Enoch Trees than the one Elijah was in. He looked at him and smiled. Motioning with his hand

for him to come closer. He seemed to be an important leader of a First Nations tribe. His eyes were filled with wisdom. His face kind. Every wrinkle beckoning him to draw close. Elijah all of a sudden found himself transported into the other forests. (Dreams to those who are perishing, seem only to be machinations of a sleeping brain... illogical and impossible. For those who are not perishing, dreams seem to operate on a much more concrete reality. Elijah will understand this much more... much later.) The elder spoke.

Come Elijah. Come and see how your father Adam lived. For we, the Red people, are a soft people who have kept the old ways. Come, learn to be earth among us.

This dream repeated itself two more times. Three times in total. Three equals confirmation.

+ + +

Elijah woke up. An incredible peace had come into his heart. All he could see was the face of the Elder. He couldn't explain why, but he knew that this Elder spoke to him with Love. Elijah needed to find him. His dream was not *havel*... it was much more concrete than any Ferrari out there.

+ + +

Elijah decided that he needed to receive the Eucharist before he went off to find the Elder. He decided that a Wednesday morning Liturgy would be best. He fired up Greg and took him to church. He was quickly reminded by the *Tantes* at church that his appearance was... well... not normal. He heard whispers.

Is that Sally's son?

Haram. He must be crazy?

I hope he doesn't hurt us.

What is he doing here.

The whispers were drowned out by the most powerful hymn in the Orthodox Church...

*Khristos anesti ek nekron,
Thanato thanaton patisas,
Ke tis en tis mnimasi,
Zoeen kharisamenos.*

*Christ is risen from the dead,
Trampling down death by death,
Upon those in the tombs,
Bestowing life.*

And then it dawned on him. Christ's death was not in vain. It was Christ and not Esther who had given His life for him. Sure, Esther conformed herself to Him, but it was His life that defeated death! Christ's death conquered everything. Vanity had no chance.

+ + +

Elijah received the Eucharist. Concrete. Nothing like a vapor. Nothing. Only Love escapes vanity. Only Love. Elijah smiled at the *Tantes*. His heart loved them. He left Ottawa in search of the beautiful Elder.

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Song of Solomon

Elijah got in his van, Greg, and drove out of the church parking lot. He quickly realized that he had no clue where he was going and where he would find the beautiful Elder from his dreams. This made Elijah belly laugh... there is nothing like a good hearty laugh— it is like a shower for the soul. It was probably the first time he laughed this hard since the accident. He parked Greg on the side of the road. Since he had just received the Eucharist, he turned inwardly and prayed.

Lord Jesus, You know that I love you. I actually have no one but You. Please direct me to the Elder. Amen.

Those were the exact words of his prayer. What his heart said was something like this.

Lord Jesus, I am lost. Help.

I AM.

Elijah's heart had a soft sensation of pain. It was pleasant. He felt like the Lord heard his prayer. This made Elijah peaceful. Never in his life had he been this out of control... he had been used to manipulating, maneuvering, planning, predicting and engineering his life. He also had never tasted the kind of peace that he was experiencing in this moment of total and utter surrender. One would say that he was completely out of his mind to try and find some stranger from his dreams. And yet, from heaven's perspective, Elijah was one of the few who was truly sane. Sane. From the Latin *sanus*. Healthy. Elijah was healthy.

Still parked on the side of the road, he had this sense, almost like a nudge in his heart, to pull out his Bible and read The Song of Solomon.

But Esther is not here!

Elijah protested.

Yes I am.

She argued.

I have only read it with her... and to her! I can't do this without her!

Elijah answered himself.

I am right here. But it is good for you to not see me. For you were created to read this book to Him. Oh how it pleases Him to see His beloved bride reading this book to Him. Elijah, don't you see? He is the Beloved! You are the Shulamite! Every soul, in the presence of Christ the Groom, is perfectly and completely the bride! Elijah... He is here... before you and mystically within you... at the same time.

I AM!

The sweet pain manifested itself once more in his heart. Elijah somehow sensed that he needed to read it. He prayed that he would survive it without Esther... but his heart was already convinced that he was not alone, and that somehow, what happened in the Eucharist was the only reality. Jesus had given Himself completely without any reservations to Elijah. This was scandalous. The Song of Solomon was scandalous. All love is scandalous. Divine Love being the most scandalous.

+ + +

Elijah sat cross legged on the floor in the back of the van and began reading Esther's part. That is what he had called it... Esther's part.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine. My Lord! These words were meant for You. In

Your presence... I am completely and utterly undone. Today, in the Eucharist, You are the One who kissed me with the kisses of Your mouth. Truly Your love is better than wine. O Esther! We've been reading this all wrong!

Speak for yourself... Esther smiled.

Elijah found himself spending several hours reading and re-reading the first chapter. He was speaking to the One physically inside of him. By the end, his heart felt like it was being stretched, pulled, reshaped, remolded into a temple for His Jesus.

Your name is ointment poured forth! Draw me away O Lord! Draw me away and I will run after You!

+ + +

It was almost 2 PM, and Elijah needed to get started on his wild goose chase of a journey. He picked up a map of Ontario from a convenience store. He studied it. He circled all the Native Reserves. He remembered that there were Enoch trees in the background of his dream.

Enoch trees are evergreens. Elijah thought. *He was most probably in a northern reserve.*

He noted that the majority of the northern reserves were unreachable by road. He would later learn that many became accessible in the winter, when the lakes froze over, and trucks would drive on the lakes and bring supplies to these reserves. He decided that he would take the 417 West till North Bay and head North on the 11.

For the first time since the accident, he had another purpose besides surviving the winter. This felt very strange

for him. This gave him hope. He felt like it was a new beginning. One he needed desperately.

+ + +

Elijah drove to North Bay. He planned to spend the night at Sunset Park right off of Lake Nipissing. That evening, he found out why they called it Sunset Park. It was tremendous. The whole sky was burning with oranges, reds and yellows. One could have expected to see the Prophet Elijah on his fiery steed ascending to the heavens in this kind of background. The fire of the sky reflected perfectly on the lake. In the distance, the Enoch trees were black in contrast to the dying light of the day. It was beautiful. It was romantic. Elijah still filled with the Eucharist— not that there ever was an expiry date on the mysteries— his heart warmed, knew that the Lord was behind this breathtaking beauty. Elijah himself felt elated, like he was being taken up on a fiery steed. He grabbed his Bible and read chapter 2 in the dying light.

*I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys...
He brought me to the banqueting house, and His banner over me
was Love...
His left hand is under my head, and His right hand embraces me...
My beloved is mine, and I am His...*

O Esther! I can hear your voice in my head speaking to the Lord as your Beloved. I can hear you calling to Him... affirming your beauty in His eyes... Yes, you are His rose of Sharon! Is it possible? O my Beloved. Is it possible that You, O Lord, look on us with such love? I am the rose of Sharon!

Elijah became silent. He pondered the great mystery of the incarnation. Divinity. Humanity. Oneness with God. Scandalous. He remembered a line in Midnight Praise... he

understood that it was written for Mama... but it equally applied to him, to his inner sanctuary at that very moment.

You are the bridal chamber.

Mama, your womb became the place where Divinity and Humanity came together. My heart. Your Son. He is in my heart. I too am becoming the bridal chamber...

It was a silent night... Elijah slept in heavenly peace.

+ + +

By night on my bed I sought the one I love;

I sought him, but I did not find him.

"I will rise now," I said,

"And go about the city;

In the streets and in the squares

I will seek the one I love."

I sought him, but I did not find him.

The watchmen who go about the city found me;

I said, "Have you seen the one I love?"

+ + +

In The Song of Solomon, Elijah noticed that there is a constant search of the Shulamite for her Beloved. One moment He is there... the next He is gone. Not that He is ever gone... but rather the sense of His presence is gone. This he also observed in himself the following morning. He woke up. Along with his bodily temperature being much lower, the warmth in his heart was gone. He looked around. He remembered that he was in North Bay. He remembered his mission. This coolness in his heart only made the chase even

more thrilling. Like his search for the Elder, his search for His beloved only increased in intensity.

He warmed his heart quickly with the Matins Psalms. He ate a hard boiled egg, which he had boiled himself in the back of Greg, along with a small piece of bread. That was sufficient till dinner for Elijah.

Elijah poured himself over the map. He studied the main towns along Highway 11. He decided to look for the most northern town accessible off of the network of roads. Nungesser Lake Lodge. That was it. He decided to stop at other towns along the way in search of the Elder. Balmertown, CFS Armstrong and Nakina. All of these towns were good candidates for his travels. He also understood that he would encounter the Elder not because of his wit, or his intelligence, but because of the will of God. This removed the pressure off of him. He decided to drive three hours a day and discover the towns along his way to Nungesser Lake Lodge. He figured that that would expose him to the most possible encounters.

The journey is far more important than the destination.

Elijah felt that his thought was a little cliché. In truth, he only said that because he had not yet experienced the destination. The destination in Elijah's case was a person. The unknown Elder.

In fact, the destination in life for everyone... is also a Person. Actually... Three Persons... Scandalous.

+ + +

Iroquois Falls. Elijah's first stop after North Bay. Hidden only 10 km from Highway 11, it rests next to the banks of the Abitibi river. For such a small town, Elijah was really

impressed with the beautiful city gardens. They were so vibrant. It made Elijah miss his Esther.

My beautiful Esther. Why didn't we come here together? You would have been able to name all the flowers.

And so, instead of encountering people, Elijah spent the rest of the day naming flowers. There were Elizabeth flowers (sun flowers), Photini flowers (pansies), Magdalene flowers (roses)... He chuckled when he called the daisies Iris flowers and called irises Lily flowers. He felt mischievous, but the effect on the flowers was magnificent. A son of Adam. Naming them. They had heard lore of a time when sons of Adam would name them... but of course the flowers had reduced them to mythological creatures. Oh how Iroquois Falls, and its population of flowers were so happy to receive Elijah.

The Elder was not there, and so Elijah left in the early morning.

The flowers never forgot Elijah.

+ + +

Kapuskasing. Elijah's next stop. He arrived in this small town with the hopes of running into people... more specifically he was hoping to run into the Beautiful Elder of his dreams. He quickly realized, as he parked Greg on the main road, that it would be difficult for him to ask anyone about the Elder since he had lived as a mute for the last several months. Elijah found it strange that he hadn't spent much time thinking about his "muteness".

It kind of just happened... he thought.

Strange. Well... self, why is it that you have stopped speaking to other humans for the last eight or nine months? How long has it been Esther? Why have I stopped talking to the world?

He thought and thought but couldn't find an answer. Deep inside, he also knew that he didn't want to face the real answer hidden deep inside of him. He was scared. He wanted

no attachment. Words build bonds. Create relationships. And well, in Elijah's case, relationships with living human beings were dangerous.

I think I have decided that I can't afford any more real relationships with humans.

This of course was absurd. And Elijah knew it.

What? Esther. Don't you look at me like that!

Not that Elijah could see Esther, nor was she looking at him like "that". But in his mind, she began to embody the voice of reason, Lady Wisdom as it were. And so she became the visage of what was right and what was wrong. There he was again... in relationship.

O my sweet Elijah. You have no need to look to me for answers. You have an Anointing within you that will lead you to all truth. You have a Fire within you... oh and how I wish it was kindled...

Elijah decided that he would continue to be mute until otherwise instructed. He also realized that in the absence of spoken words, that his first word would have to be very carefully chosen. He didn't want to just open his mouth and pronounce any old boring word. It would have to be special. Somehow, from his encounter with deep silence, he recognized the power of a word. He also understood how poor words had become in the world he had left behind. Words were so cheap, he thought. He thought of how cowardly humans had become, hiding behind phones and email. He had no idea how, only a short few years in the future, words would become almost completely meaningless with the emergence of smart phones and social media.

To think that the entire Cosmos came to be through a Word from God. With a word the Beloved calmed the sea, healed the sick and raised the dead. No wonder... by our words we will be saved and by our words we will be condemned. What has happened to words?

He remained in thought for a while pondering the decay of words.

Then it hit him hard. A thought that is.

Words haven't changed... we did. We are the ones who don't know how to properly formulate life giving and life-bearing words. Words are powerful, carriers of something far greater. Words with faith, living faith, can move mountains! O Elijah, he told himself, be still. Be still and learn from silence...

Elijah remained in silence... silence of thought for a long time. Esther broke the silence... kind of.

My sweet Elijah, words carry the breath of the speaker. The Eternal Word also carried the Eternal Breath of His Father. When you speak, your words carry your spirit too. For out of the abundance of the heart does the mouth speak. Words my sweet Elijah... a mystery coming from this side of life... before anything was... was the Word...

Of course, Esther herself being on the other side of the veil spoke words that carried an understanding and a weight that far exceeded anything Elijah could understand. One could wonder why she even bothered to speak to Elijah since he could not hear her. One does wonder at many things that heaven does...

Elijah decided that it was time to discover Kapuskasing. He had parked his car on the Trans Canada Highway, five kilometers after the McDonald's and only two kilometers after the bridge. He got out of the car and saw across the street a small cemetery.

Perfect! He thought. *I can talk to these guys. Maybe they can help me with finding the Elder.*

He crossed the road to the tiny cemetery. The sign read:

*THOUSANDS OF UKRAINIAN CANADIANS WERE UNJUSTLY
INTERNEED
AS "ENEMY ALIENS" DURING CANADA'S FIRST NATIONAL
INTERNMENT*

OPERATIONS OF 1914-1920.

*THIS PLAQUE IS IN MEMORY OF THOSE HELD
AT THE KAPUSKASING INTERNMENT CAMP*

BETWEEN 14 DECEMBER 1914 AND 24 FEBRUARY 1920

Elijah's heart stopped. He wasn't sure if it was the silence or was it his imagination, but he felt, in one fell swoop, all the pain of the people who had been forced into this specific labor camp. The feeling overwhelmed him. He knew things he should not have known. He felt things that somehow attached themselves to his own suffering. The suffering of loss and separation... it all came at him. And yet, he had no way of knowing this pain. He had no way of knowing that Canada had forced thousands of Ukrainians, Germans and Turks to clear cut over a hundred acres of spruce trees... He had no way of knowing all the hardships they underwent from the freezing cold winters and the mosquito infested summers. He had no way of knowing all the anguish that these internees experienced as they were dropped off by train in camps with nowhere to escape. Nothing for hundreds of kilometers around. They were imprisoned for no other reason than for their ethnicity... deemed dangerous sympathizers with Germany during the First World War. Although Elijah had no way of knowing these things, somehow, he knew.

He walked up to Mike Herbert's grave stone. Died April 4, 1916.

Hi Mike. Pleased to meet you. Hope things are going well. I mean, I hope things are better for you now... I mean... since the

internment and all... I am Elijah. I too have suffered great loss. It's a long story... but if you run into the most beautiful and wonderful girl in heaven, you'll have met my Esther... tell her I say hi. Anyways, I am looking for an Elder. I am pretty sure he was a First Nation Chief of some sort. I have no way of finding him. I am also really sorry for what Canada did to you. I mean, I wasn't around... but I am not sure why I never learned about you in history class... Well... I won't keep you too long...

Elijah spent the rest of the afternoon having conversations at each tombstone. He was sure at least one of them would say hi to Esther on his behalf. *Better safe than sorry*, he told himself.

+ + +

*Set me as a seal upon your heart,
As a seal upon your arm;
For love is as strong as death.*

+ + +

That night Elijah dreamt that he was working in the dead of winter, cutting down spruce trees, carrying them away, processing them into lumber. He dreamt of soldiers barking orders at him. He dreamt of hunger and thirst. He dreamt of mosquitoes mauling him. He remembered Ukrainian Orthodox priests coming to encourage him and bring him food on special holidays. He remembers One Who labored next to him for the entirety of the dream. He never spoke. He was just always with him. His eyes were so sad. And yet one look at His face and Elijah would be comforted for weeks. His

dream felt like it lasted five years, two months and ten days. It did.

+ + +

The next morning, Elijah woke up exhausted. He drove to Hearst. He decided:

No cemeteries and no internment camps today.

After all, he didn't need another dream.

Hearst was his official next stop for the day. He looked around. There was a Shell station, a Petro Canada... and a McDonald's. He decided to move on.

The Elder is definitely not here.

+ + +

Elijah's journey into the unknown North was quite the icon of his inner journey. He was seeking a man he met in his dreams... Elijah himself being a mute, homeless wanderer. And yet, one thing is "clear" about the spiritual journey of saints— nothing is clear! Things were getting messy in Elijah's life. He had always thought that being a good Christian probably meant that he would start going to church a few times a week, teach Sunday School, attend Bible Study and pay his tithes. And yet, in his seemingly messy life, having lost his parents and the love of his life, he found himself more alive than he ever felt. He was in a place of utter dependence on God. As he was driving to Nakina, his next stop, he was all smiles thinking about how his Beloved was going to provide for him next... how his Beloved was going to orchestrate his encounter with the Elder.

I mean, You are the organizer of the Cosmos... from macro to micro... You take care of galaxies and you take care of the atoms that make up the most minute cell... what is one little encounter between two of Your children. How did I ever imagine that I could

live a well planned life without You? What a burden to have to think about everything myself? And I called it independence and freedom. My Beloved Lord, I will follow You... I will seek You with all my heart...

As his heart was speaking these words to his Beloved, he found himself approaching a beautiful white church with its steeple reaching up to the sky. It stood alone, like Elijah, at the end of a peninsula surrounded by a gorgeous expansive lake. A sign read: Longlac #58 First Nations Reserve. This church would be deemed dangerous and later catch fire. Quite like Elijah... for he too would one day be deemed dangerous and set on fire. For now, this church was so attractive to Elijah. He stopped the van and drove up to the church. It was called The Church of the Infant Jesus. He sat at its steps as the church doors were nailed shut. Looking around he saw young children in groups of four or five riding their bikes up and down the peninsula. There were teenagers swimming in the lake.

These kids were earth.

He felt bad for the kids from his old life who were addicted to TV and video games. One group of kids, no older than nine years old, rode their bikes right up to him.

What's your name eh?

Elijah smiled but didn't respond.

You don't speak eh?

They all burst out laughing at him.

Your mom didn't teach you to speak eh?

The kids howled. Elijah laughed along with them. Although deep down, he didn't find it funny. He was just happy to see kids laughing. They got back on their bikes and left him. That was it. That was his first encounter with humans— living humans— in days. They seemed to speak more slowly than city kids. They ended their sentences with a bit of higher pitch. Their speech almost felt sung. He remembered the Ents

in Lord of the Rings. He imagined that these kids spoke like the Ents... slowly and musically. The Elder in his dream had the same pace of speech. So simple. So beautiful. So... Earth.

+ + +

He filled up Greg at the gas station by the Subway Restaurant in Longlac. He was tempted to buy himself a sub... but he hadn't done anything like that since the accident. He always prepared his own food. He would have to break his silence in order to place an order at the Subway.

Not worth it Elijah.

He told himself. He was sure that they put some sort of addicting narcotic substance every time they bake their bread, because the smell was almost impossible to resist. But he resisted. Elijah got back into Greg and drove off onto Highway 11. Thirty minutes later, he turned right on Highway 584 towards Geraldton and Nakina.

The smell of the Subway bread was still lingering in his mind. He was hungry. He decided that he would stop at a restaurant for a small bite. He would just have to point at something on the menu and hope no one would ask him questions. He stopped in Geraldton at a small restaurant. Everything was small in Geraldton.

He walked in. Looked around. No one was there to greet him at the door. He walked in. The restaurant was all but empty. He could see the back of someone's head sitting in the only booth available in the whole restaurant. It all felt quite eerie. He wasn't sure if he should just seat himself or wait for someone to take him to a table. He waited awkwardly for what felt like ten minutes. It really was only forty three seconds. *Chronos* sucks. He turned around in order to leave. Then all of sudden a familiar voice cried out.

Elijah!

It was the voice of the Elder. Elijah's heart almost stopped at the sound of someone calling his name. He turned. And there, next to the only booth stood the Elder. Smiling from ear to ear. His eyes had the same smile cracks that *Uncle Onsi's* had.

Elijah. You did good time eh!

With those slow musical words, *Chronos* left the restaurant.

Come Elijah. Come. The Great Spirit has brought you to me safe and sound eh. Come and sit. There is much I have to tell you eh.

And so *Kairos* was ushered in, riding on the wings of the Great Spirit. Elijah had found the Elder... or was it Elijah who was found? It didn't matter.

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Wisdom

Elijah sat at the table. Stunned. Mute. Staring. Exploding. Joyful. Anticipating. Present. Ready.

Chief Billy, for that was his name, smiled. He didn't say anything for a few minutes. Just smiled. It didn't look like he was holding anything back. He was just being present. Enjoying the encounter. Elijah was beginning to fidget as he felt awkward with the silence. Mind you, he was in no rush to speak himself. He was all ears... Just like Madame Laurier used to say. *Big ears! Small mouths!* The mental mention of Madame Laurier brought back a flood of memories. Little Joshua, big Joshua...

Elijah.

Chief Billy interrupted his daydream.

Yes, yes. I know. Mama told me you are not speaking these days. She told me everything eh.

YOU KNOW MAMA?

You are probably wondering how I know Mama. Well my young friend, I took Mama as my mother a long time ago when my own mother died. Ever since that day, I have been turning to her any time a kid would naturally turn to his mother eh. She told me you two were close when you were at the age of nine eh?

I am so sorry for your loss. Elijah said in his heart to the Elder.

No need to feel sorry Elijah. As you now know, the Creator compensates greatly when we turn to Him. He gave me His

own mother to be mine! What a great honor!

So, you are telling me you can read my mind? Seriously. You can read my mind! OK... what am I thinking now... um... trees, trees, trees, trees, trees....

Elijah. It doesn't work that way. Trees. I am one of the the children of the Great Creator. He has become one of us. He died for you and for me eh. He went back to His Father and sent us the Great Spirit. You know all this. Trees. I am not a mind reader. Trees. Whatever the Great Spirit gives me to say, I say. Trees. That's it.

Chief Billy burst out laughing. He couldn't stop laughing for about thirty long seconds. Elijah began to unwind and felt like he was exactly where he needed to be. The pace of the Beautiful Elder, for that is what he called him in his mind for the rest of his life, was so slow compared to anyone he had ever met. He spoke slowly, paused often, and laughed long and hard. Time out of time.

This time, before Elijah could even ask him his name, the Elder interjected.

My name is Billy. People still call me Chief Billy even though I haven't been a chief for over thirty years.

He paused for a long time. He smiled and looked down before he continued.

My young friend, I only have three days left here before the Great Spirit takes me home, to the loving embrace of my Noos— that is the Ojibwe word for Father. Actually it means “my father”. If I was talking about “your” father, I would have said goos.

Chief Billy burst out laughing again. Elijah couldn't exactly hear what he was saying in his laughter... but it seemed like he was saying something like “your father is a goose!”. Once he composed himself he continued.

What I am saying eh... is that I only have three days left here on earth... and the Great Spirit has sent you to me so I

can adopt you for three days as my *noozhishenh*— my grandson. The Creator loves you so much. And well... so do I eh. He sent you to me so you can learn what it means to be human, like Adam. In Hebrew *Adam* means to be red. *Adamah* means earth. My people, the red people, are the ones who remained closest to *Adamah*. The Creator took earth, and breathed into it and so the human became alive with His Breath. The Great Spirit still seeks earth to make His home in, to fill, to give life to. Our work, is to become earth. Come *noozhishenh*, let's go back to the bush so I can teach you. Besides, I need a ride back home, my nephew dropped me off here eh.

Chief Billy burst out laughing once again.

Elijah on the other hand was not laughing. He had come close to twelve hundred kilometers to be adopted by a man, that he somehow mystically felt very close to already, that was going to leave him in three days. Without realizing it, Elijah's heart broke so deeply and he began to mourn the loss of a Grandfather he had just met.

See... Elijah... He told himself. *Relationships are dangerous. I don't know if I can handle losing one more person.* Elijah wept internally. He was going to cherish every moment, every second he was going to have with the beautiful Elder.

They left the restaurant without seeing anyone, or eating anything. The smell of the Subway bread was long gone from Elijah's mind. He was being fed by the very presence of the

Holy Spirit in the Elder. Elijah understood how he got his smile wrinkles next to his eyes... he just laughed... eh!

+ + +

Elijah and Chief Billy got into Greg. Chief Billy directed Elijah to go further North on the 584. After fifteen minutes of complete silence, the Elder began to speak again.

My dear Elijah, life for my people has changed so much from when I was a little one eh. I remember our whole life was in the bush. I remember *noos* and *nimishoomis*, my grandfather, spending their days trapping, fishing and hunting. The men were always in charge of fire and the women were in charge of water. My grandmother would wake up before everyone to go and gather water from the river, in the dark. Every day. Rain, snow or shine. *Noos* would spend a few hours a day just chopping wood. We little ones would go and help him get the dry kindle wood from the bush. My sister, as she got older, started helping Grandma with getting the water. We had our ways. We were happy.

One day, a white man showed up in our camp. He looked like he was searching for something. You know, the white man is always searching for something.

Elijah's mind went to Pac-Man... and well... it went to his father too... *Baba, I hope you are doing well...*

Anyways, as was our custom, we welcomed him into our camp. He saw in *Nimishoomis*' tipi a nugget of gold that his father had fetched from the river. The white man became agitated. He kept looking at it. He offered my Grandpa to bring him a box of tea every year for the rest of his life if he would give him the nugget of gold. *Nimishoomis* accepted graciously. The following year, while we were sitting in our tipi, we heard the sound of what we thought was a hundred herds of horses or of bison eh... but there was no bison anywhere near where we were. When we stepped out, we saw

these monstrous machines coming right for our camp. These machines were tearing down the trees out of their path. In a moment, our lives were changed— just like that... we were displaced. We ran, with only a few things that my father and grandfather had a moment to gather. Those machines would have trampled us if we had stayed another minute. This was my first encounter with the White man. Our people had to move hundreds of kilometers to the North where we were hoping to find a place we can be left in peace. That's it... all we wanted was to live our lives in peace.

When Elijah looked over to the Elder, he had tears running down his cheeks.

You see Elijah, our people are a soft people. We are soft eh. We don't leave a mark. I still weep over all the trees, animals and living beings that were uprooted in our original forest. All for what? A shiny hunk of metal. No wonder St Paul said that money was at the root of so much evil eh?

Chief Billy was lost in thought for a few moments. He wiped his tears. And then he gently said.

You know Elijah, we never saw one tea bag eh?

He burst out laughing. Sprinkled in his laughter were the words— not one tea bag!!! Elijah wondered why he found that so funny.

You see Elijah, we never wanted the tea in the first place. I find myself still praying for that man. I still remember his face. That was over seventy five years ago. I am sure he is gone from this earth. I was just so upset for him. Who taught him to lie, cheat, steal and destroy. His poor soul was so empty it was constantly searching to fill its void... no matter what or who was the cost... Turn left up there... right by where it says Sullivan Lake eh.

Greg got on the gravel road. Elijah instinctively slowed down as he drove down the winding gravel road. Chief continued.

I am going to take you first to our old land, the land our people came to when we were chased away from our forest.

Chief Billy entered into a deep silence for the next sixteen kilometers. Elijah enjoyed being surrounded by forest on both sides of the road. The trees were glorious. He loved being up North, he decided. He couldn't understand how it was possible to ever harm or seek to uproot or hurt anyone that was as beautiful and gentle as the Elder. He thought of the harm and damage that the Elder's people endured. He wondered if this suffering made them hard or if they remained soft. There were so many questions Elijah wanted to ask. But he chose to remain silent. He figured that the One who brought the Elder to him would direct all their conversations. He chose to accept the poverty of his position in that moment. Unable to offer anything back to the Elder. Just his silence. He was the one who was receiving.

Chief Billy, not sure if the Great Spirit is telling you what I am thinking right now... but I wanted you to know that I am honored to be your adopted grandson... I am so attached to you already and I can't imagine that I will be losing you in three days... promise me that you will teach me everything you need to in the next three days... promise me that when you get to heaven, you will say hi to my Esther... please... also, can you please let Mama know that I really love her and that I am thankful for her... I am sorry for what your family and your people have gone through... and yet somehow... I feel bad for all the people who don't know you and who are agitated, lost and looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places... I was one of them... I really was... well... I just wanted to say thank you... I feel super honored that you would spend your last days with me... thank you...

Chief Billy, turned to Elijah the second he had finished. Looked at him deeply in the eyes and smiled. He answered silently in his heart.

My dear dear grandson. I too am honored that Mama asked me to spend time with you. She wouldn't tell me much about your future... but enough to know that it is I who am honored.

+ + +

Here we are. Turn left here. This is the site of the old reserve.

Elijah turned. He slowed right down as he felt like the Elder was entering into a very nostalgic moment. In fact the Elder had decided he wanted to take Elijah to all the different spots that had helped him personally to become earth... *adamah*. He was saying goodbye to his earth.

Look here, to the left, Elijah... that is the spot of our old church.

Elijah came to a full stop in front of a small field that was just a sprinkling of wild grasses and flowers. The Elder wept.

It was here that my friends and I used to run on Sunday mornings, with firewood to heat up the church. It was always a race between me and old Tom. We wanted the priest to choose us to be his altar boys.

Tears were streaming down his face at this point. Elijah felt like he was witnessing something so sacred. Something so sad.

When my people lost this church ten years ago, it was like the community lost its heart. The church was the one thing that held our community together. It was in 1946 that Father Maurice had come to our community. He came with a group of missionary nuns from Europe. Here was a white man that was from head to toe good eh. He was good. Oh he was so good. They came and lived among us. They did not come requiring anything from us... they came and became part of our family. They lived in tipis like us, they hunted with us, they fetched water like us. They ate with us, laughed with us and cried with us. They told us of the Creator's love for us. They told us of His Son who gave His life for us. We

understood this so deeply. You see, we know and understand the Great Way of all of creation. Everything, humbly, quietly, gently follows this Way. Everything, gently and without thought gives itself for the life of the other. You see, we ask every animal we hunt if they are willing to give their life for us. Each moose I have ever hunted, looked at me first and offered his life for me. Our people don't take this offering lightly... we give thanks to the animal and thank the Creator for the life of the animal that is being transferred to us. Every part of the animal is then used. Nothing wasted. Waste would be a dishonor to the sacrifice. Everything is redeemed. You see the moose, the beaver, the stock of corn, the squash fruit—they all offer themselves as food and life for us. This is the Great Way. Our people honor and respect all of life. And so when the Creator gave us His Son, Jesus, and He came and gave us His life... we understood, we knew deep in our very blood life, that the moose, the beaver the stock of corn and the squash fruit—all of creation was following the Creator's Son... they had learned from the Son because He is the one by Whom all things were made. If they offered their life for the life of another, how much more will the Son offer His life for the life of the world. This is the way of our soft people. His blood... His life... became our life. Oh how we received and loved Father Maurice into our own families. We saw in him, the same Great Way. He was giving his life for us! Oh how we loved him and the nuns. They gave their life... for our eternal life.

The problem with the men and women who came to Turtle Island (that is what he called Canada) from over the great ocean, was that they saw themselves as being above the rest of creation. In fact, they forget that they themselves are part of the animal kingdom. They separate themselves from all living things in order to consume freely and to waste without thought eh? They forget that they are created... creatures in

whom the Breath of the Creator was placed. They stand at the axis of all creation... between the physical and the spiritual... between the seen and the unseen. But they reject their part in the physical world... as though they can consume and destroy creation at will. This is the fall... this is why our village was ravaged by machines... because we too... were not living beings in their eyes... they could not believe that we, the red people, were connected to them. They called us savages...

Here Chief Billy could no longer hold himself. He wept and wept. At times he looked like a five year old child... groans erupted from his heart. His soul had carried this pain. After a long time, the Elder settled.

But you know Elijah, even now... even today, the Great Way has not changed. I have forgiven them. The Creator has not given me any other way... I would willingly give my life for them... I will give my life for you Elijah.

Elijah found himself weeping with his new Grandfather.

Elijah, the first step in becoming earth... is just that. To recognize your *createdness*. You are a creature, just like any other creature in this world. Don't forget that you came from dust and to dust you will return. Embrace your connectedness and need for all of earth. You are physical. You are not just a floating mind that is trapped in your body. No. You are an ensouled body and an embodied soul. The Son of the Creator was incarnate. You too must become flesh. Stop living in your lofty ideas... become earth by embracing your physical atomic reality. You actually are already earth. Look around you. I used to run around on this very land as a child... barefoot. No one told me to live otherwise. But I now know that I grew up feeling the earth beneath my feet. I was a member of creation... not above it. In fact, Father Maurice taught us to see ourselves as the servants of creation... He insisted that we were all considered by the Creator to be priests of creation. God rest his soul. Oh how I loved him.

I loved him so much that I went to the bishop of our diocese and asked if I could go into seminary and become a priest. He looked at me and said... how can you... you're an Indian. That day I came back to Father Maurice and asked him if he had been lying to us this whole time. Father Maurice broke down in tears when he heard what the bishop said. We never saw the bishop again after that. I assumed that Father Maurice stopped inviting him. But I have never lost my love for the Creator, His Son and the Great Spirit. He has carried me throughout all my years...

Chief Billy became silent. Then, Chief Billy got out of Greg, crossed over to the land where the church was. He did the sign of the cross over himself. Prostrated himself to the ground. Grabbed a handful of the earth and held it up... with fingers slowly opening and the sand slipping through his fingers. He stood still for a long moment. Signed himself again with the cross and returned to Greg.

Goodbye my sweet sweet church.

Elijah and Chief Billy spent the following three hours driving through the old reserve. The old reserve had no more buildings remaining. It was just a huge field with a few dirt roads that went into a circle. But to Billy, it was like every structure still stood in its place. He stopped at each family's home, told their story and shared how they were somehow related to him. Elijah quickly understood that there were really seven or eight big families that comprised his tribe. He spoke of each one's gifts, talents, beauty, struggles and achievement. It was clear that Chief Billy had loved his people very deeply and carried them in his heart. He shared stories of Father Maurice and the nuns. He spoke of how everyone shared everything. When one person caught a moose, the whole community ate. Nothing was for sale. Everyone had exactly what they needed. He laughed. He wept. Sometimes he

did both at the same time. Before he left every plot of land, he said goodbye.

He told Elijah how the government, over ten years ago showed up to their old reserve. They told his people that they didn't deem their reserve safe and livable. So they came to them with promises of building a safe and modern community for them. Houses with heating, electricity, running water and running toilets. And indeed, the government had kept their word. Chief Billy then explained how all the elders began dying when they moved over to the new reserve.

You see Elijah, if one of our elders wants water all they have to do is this.

Chief Billy did the movement with his hand of turning on the tap.

Before, they had to walk several kilometers to go and get their water from the river. This kept our elders moving and healthy. Now the majority of them are becoming obese. Many now have diabetes. Majority have been frequenting the hospital in Geraldton and are on dozens of pills every day. This was never the case for our Elders! Ease of life, separated us from our earth. We became sick and are now dying because of this move. Oh how I long for our old reserve. But the government forced us to burn everything down. And so my people continue to suffer. Trying to live like the modern man... and losing our identity as creatures, children of the Creator.

After the tour of the old reserve, Chief Billy directed Elijah to what looked like a campground by a lake. The Elder had prepared everything. There were a couple of tents. A used fire pit. They would camp there for the evening. Elijah took in everything that the beautiful Elder said. For the first time in a really long time, he felt like he belonged to a much larger family of created beings. He was not alone. All of earth was

with him. He felt connected to all living creatures. He was thankful for his day with the Elder.

+ + +

Right before nightfall, the Beautiful Elder, as Elijah loved to call him in his heart, started the most beautiful fire in the fire pit. This was a man that had started thousands of fires. It almost felt like the fire had somehow magically spontaneously ignited from the tips of his fingers. It didn't. It was just that the Elder knew exactly how to start a fire that was just the right size.

Wisdom. Sophia... This man knew fire. He didn't know about fire... he knew fire. Somehow, he himself had become fire... Elijah, what are you talking about. He chuckled to himself. *You can't become fire... right?*

Elijah.

The Elder called out from the other side of the fire, Elijah felt like maybe the Elder had actually become part of the fire. The dancing flames made his face seem in one moment like a child's face... full of innocence— and in the next moment, the face of an old sage... full of experience.

This morning I told you about connecting with creation in order to become earth... *Adamah*. This evening, I want to tell you about the seven Grandfathers of my people and how they have taught us to become earth. Each Grandfather a virtue. The seven together teach my people how to be truly human.

Elijah was mesmerized by the Elder's high pitch voice as he spoke in his language naming the seven Grandfathers.

Dbaadendiziwin. Aakwa'ode'ewin. Gwekwaadziwin. Nbwaakaawin. Debwewin. Mnaadendimowin. Zaagidwin.

Humility. Bravery. Honesty. Wisdom. Truth. Respect. Love.

As he said each word, it was as though Chief Billy was speaking of something that was springing from inside of him. These were not mere empty words... but words with breath.

Words with spirit. Words that carried the tradition of his people. Words that he himself had aspired to incarnate. Words that pointed ultimately to the Unspoken Logos of the Creator.

He spent over thirty minutes on each word— telling stories, analogies, legends and allegories. Each word carried a certain weight. Sometimes he would be unable to finish a story because he was weeping so intensely that he could only say the first part of the word... and then would break into sobs. But he wept most intensely when speaking about Jesus and how He embodied each of the virtues. He spoke of the humility and bravery of the cross. The honesty and wisdom of His teachings. The truth of His sacrifice for us. The respect with which He dealt with every encounter... sinners and saints alike. But when the Elder came to Love... he paused for a long time. It had been over three hours of the Elder teaching and sharing. He poured himself out completely in front of Elijah. Oh... but when he came to Love... something happened. The fire had been very slowly waning. And yet somehow, the Elder was becoming more and more illuminated as he spoke. And Oh... when he came to Love...

Elijah's gaze was transfixed on the Elder's face as somehow he became brighter and brighter. It was only when he said the word Zaagidwin... Love... that Elijah noticed that the Elder was somehow glowing... physically.

My beloved grandson Elijah, think nothing of your new Grandfather... he is nothing. I am just earth. What you are seeing is Zaagidwin. Beloved Grandson, Love is the sum of all of the other virtues... all in one. This light is Zaagidwin. The Creator is Zaagidwin. I am His beloved. And He gives light to

every man that comes into the world. Love. Light. Even when I am but earth... I am just earth. Oh Zaagidwin... Oh Lord Love...

+ + +

The fire died at 2:37 AM. The Elder and Elijah had both been sitting in silence around the dying embers. When the last one was extinguished, Elijah remembered that the Elder now only had two days to live. Elijah sat and pondered the words of the Elder. Elijah pondered the Elder. Elijah pondered the Maker of the Elder. And then... he slept. His heart filled with *Zaagidwin*.

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Sirach

Meegwetch. Oh Creator. *Meegwetch.*

Elijah woke up to the sound of the Elder praying. He found the Elder looking up to the sky and repeating the word *meegwetch* over and over. Then, the Elder stopped, pulled out a bag that held something that looked just like tobacco. In fact, Elijah was sure it was tobacco. Then the Elder looked up again and sprinkled some tobacco on the ground. When Elijah looked up, he saw what the Elder had been looking at. It was a bald eagle. Somehow Elijah knew that the reason he was sprinkling the tobacco on the ground was somehow connected to the eagle.

Elijah. Come and see eh.

Elijah was confused as to how the Elder knew that he was awake since the Elder had his back to him.

Come Elijah. I know you're awake because your snoring stopped quite suddenly. It doesn't require the Great Spirit to reveal that to me.

Again, he burst out laughing. This time Elijah joined him in his laugh. Of course, Elijah made no sounds in his laugh. His vocal chords were hibernating.

Come and see. Look up. The bald eagle is the animal that symbolizes *Zaagidwin*. Love! Because Love makes us soar to the heights like the eagle eh. Eagles mate for life. The two eagles, in their deep love for each other, lock their talons into each other, in deep commitment, and spiral down together free falling and holding on to each other. The eagle reminds

us of the Love of the Creator for His children. His Son, free falls down with us into Hades! And so my Elders always taught me to offer tobacco when we see a bald eagle. It is an offering of thanks to the Creator. *Meegwetch. Meegwetch Noos, meegwetch!*

Esther. He just offered tobacco to God. This is so cool! Who knew you could offer anything to God! Wow... I am so disconnected. I never thought that I could offer Him something so physical in thanksgiving! I guess that is what ancient people have been doing... but I've been so disconnected. It's kind of like offering incense. I never thought that was weird. But, come to think of it, it is so strange. Tree resin? That is what we are offering to God. But it makes sense! Oh it is so painful for me to see how far I am from being Aadamah... I get it... you are all heaven... I know. But what I am understanding is that I first have to become earth before I can begin to really experience heaven. Anyways... sorry I didn't talk to you at all yesterday. Did you see what he did last night? SO COOL. I know... I know. Not super cool from your perspective. Anyways. Good to catch up! Can you tell everyone that he is coming to you all tomorrow? Make sure you connect with him. He will update you on my... regress. I almost said progress... but progress is not what I am going for these days. I am returning my love... I am regressing to earth. I should really be focusing on what the Elder is saying.

Elijah. Are you ready? Say it. I know, I know... not out loud. But say it in your heart. Meegwetch. It means thank you eh. You see Elijah, earth doesn't have anything of its own. It offers nothing. Earth is the great receiver of everything. Earth receives the seeds. Earth receives the water. Earth receives the heat and light from the sun. Earth receives the oxygen it needs. Earth is nothing on its own. Earth receives. The red people, soft as we are, know that we are all earth. We are all receiving everything from the Great Spirit! We have nothing of ourselves. All we can offer is... that's right... meegwetch!

Meegwetch for everything. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you! Elijah...

Chief Billy paused, looked deeply into his eyes and said:

Meegwetch. I am deeply thankful for you Elijah! My new grandson. I am deeply thankful. *Meegwetch*.

+ + +

Elijah and Chief Billy went for a walk in the forest. The Elder called it the bush. It really was a massive forest surrounding a beautiful lake... actually it was a network of lakes. The Elder seemed like he was on a mission. He walked slowly. He walked with purpose. He stopped with purpose. Every once in a while he would walk up to a birch tree and study it. Once he took out his knife and cut a line straight down on the bark of the tree. And then he peeled the bark, as it popped off the bark in a beautiful uniform manner. Immediately he pulled out his tobacco and said *meegwetch*. He was thanking the creator for the bark of the tree. He gave thanks for everything he took from nature.

Esther. This guy is incredible. He is so aware of God's gifts. Everything... I mean he sees everything as a gift. I imagine that Adam must have felt like this. Meegwetch Esther. I am so thankful for you... you have no idea. Had you not sent me on this wild goose chase of becoming earth... I would have never met my grandfather.

He chuckled at how quickly he attached to his grandfather.

Meegwetch my beautiful Elder. Meegwetch.

The Elder continued to harvest birch bark and offer tobacco. Elijah was wondering why he needed so much birch... but he couldn't ask questions... so instead he just repeated thank you in his heart.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you... Thank you...

Elijah was handed twelve birch bark peelings to carry back to the campsite. He loved being in the forest.

Meegwetch for the forest. Meegwetch.

+++

Elijah, today I will go into the reserve to say goodbye to my friends and family. I would like you to accompany me eh.

Elijah's heart stopped. People. He couldn't be around people. But his Grandfather had just asked him to... and so he told himself he had no choice. This was part of his learning.

They both got into Greg, drove to where the old reserve was, but instead of turning right into it, they turned left into the new reserve. He immediately thought of the elders of this reserve turning on water faucets. That piece of information that Chief Billy had told him really upset him.

Was the government so unwise and so enthralled with comfort that they could not foresee how these elders were in need of their daily walk to the river? No no... they build gyms instead of living real life. Abba Father, please forgive them... please forgive me... I had no idea how far removed I am from your design for me as a human.

The Elder directed Elijah to a small cottage like house with blue paneling. Peter's house. They found Peter sitting outside under a tree. He had removed the back seat of his old truck and placed it under the tree in his front yard. Peter used to sit there for hours. In complete silence. Just watching. Peter was actually an incredibly talented wood sculptor. He had carved the fourteen stations of the cross for the church. They were relics in the community. Everyone knew that Peter had dedicated almost two years of his life to those carvings. Now as he was getting older, he mostly made crucifixes and rosaries from the wood that he gathered from the bush. Peter was Chief Billy's closest friend.

Bojo Pete! Just sitting eh?

That was Billy's greeting to his best friend. *Bojo* means hello or good day. It is one of those French words that had

crept into the Ojibwe language. *Bojo* comes from the word *bonjour*. It just stuck. Not as damaging as water faucets.

Peter responded after what felt like a whole forty five minutes. In fact it was probably closer to forty five seconds.

Bojo.

Peter hardly even looked at Elijah. Now, Peter was not being mean or wicked or rude... that's the thing, Peter was simply just... being.

Hey Pete. I'm going home to the bush tomorrow eh? Do you have my cross ready eh?

I have your cross ready Chief. I have it ready.

Elijah was freaking out.

What was just happening. Did he just tell his best friend so matter of factly that he was going to be dying? That's it? I am going home to the bush tomorrow? I have your cross ready Chief? They were completely at peace about everything. No display of devastation or dramatic goodbyes. That's it. He is going home to the bush.

Hey Pete... This is my grandson Elijah eh. He's Egyptian eh?

Bojo.

Oh Pete, he won't answer you. He is mute eh.

Both burst out laughing.

Well that's not politically correct. Thought Elijah. What if I was really mute?

After the two friends settled from their laughter, Peter looked intently at Elijah.

Bojo Elijah. You are not a mute eh. Look at this tree behind me. He speaks. Look at these rocks on the ground. They speak. No one is truly mute eh. But if you want to be silent, I understand. It may not be so much about silence eh... it's a lot more about listening.

He turned to Chief Billy.

Meegwetch Chief. *Meegwetch*. May your way home be swift. I know Mama will be waiting for you. Please greet Smiling Bear for me. I miss that fatso! Whisper my love to the Creator. Tell Him...

Pete could not continue. A tear started to form on his beautifully aged face and got stuck in one of his smile wrinkles... it finally broke free and rolled down his cheek.

Tell Him... *Meegwetch* for everything. *Meegwetch*.

Chief Billy was just looking down. Silence and love reigned in that moment.

Oh sweet Zaagidwin. Meegwetch oh Creator for showing me these two beautiful Elders. Each more earth than the other. Oh the depth of their simplicity and humility! I can't. Esther... I can't. I never imagined such beauty and childlikeness could exist.

Chief Billy broke the silence.

Pete, you always were the slower one! I beat you almost every Sunday morning to church eh? Look at me now... Father Maurice will be happy that his favorite made it first... again! *Meegwetch* Pete. *Meegwetch*.

Elijah and Billy got into Greg. They drove off. Pete sat there for the rest of the day. In fact he spent the evening and the entire night sitting there... listening and whispering. He sat in the presence of the Creator... he figured he would whisper *Meegwetch* to the Creator himself. That night, he thanked him for Chief. Oh how he loved his Chief. He only entered his house when he was sure the Chief had made it home... safely.

+ + +

Elijah and the beautiful Elder spent the day going from one relative to the other. Every time he entered the home, they all looked at him funny. The Chief would say something in Ojibwe and they would all start laughing. Elijah would make out the word Egyptian in the midst of their laughter and chatter. He understood that their go to response was joy.

Something new? Joy. Something difficult? Joy. Something different? Joy. Earth. It always receives. It receives and is therefore thankful.

The Elder didn't seem to be telling his family and friends that he was leaving them. But he took the time to just be present with each one.

The Elder's people were truly a soft people. They seemed happy and thankful to just be with each other. Esther... it's so different up here... I mean down here... I mean up North... you know what I mean. The young honor and respect the elders. When Chief just opened his mouth, everyone in the room would just go quiet.

At the end of every visit, the Elder simply looked at them, paused and said... *Meegwetch.*

Elijah and Chief Billy spent hours going from home to home. It was about 5 PM when they had completed the Chief's *meegwetch* procession.

Elijah. Let's go back to the campsite. I have one last thing I must do. Greg graciously carried them to the camp site. Elijah's heart felt so light. So joyful. So at peace with the encounters. He felt at home!

+ + +

The Elder didn't say much for the rest of that evening. He only worked diligently at something. He seemed to be sowing together all the birch bark that he had gathered earlier in the morning. He was using what looked like tree roots as the thread for bringing all of it together. It looked like he was making a canoe of sorts. Obviously, it wasn't a real canoe... but more like a box in the shape of a canoe. Elijah just watched his rhythmic movements. At some point, he started a fire as it was getting dark. His fire was nothing like the Elder's fire.

Meegwetch Elijah. Meegwetch.

Elijah smiled and nodded. But there was a certain heaviness that was beginning to weigh on Elijah's heart. As he watched the Elder make the "canoe", he realized that what he was making was his coffin. The Elder seemed excited... almost like a little child again.

It was 11:39 PM when the Elder stood up all of a sudden.

Elijah. It's time.

With that he picked up his canoe coffin and started dragging it towards the bush. Elijah followed. The stars were out. The moon was full.

Thank you sister moon. Thank you for lighting my path on this night of nights. Great Spirit direct me. Come. Great Spirit. Come!

Elijah was in complete awe at what was happening right here before his very eyes. The beautiful Elder of his dreams, that he had just met yesterday was walking to his final place of rest. He was witnessing something sacred. Something otherworldly. He took his shoes off and walked barefoot in the forest. It hurt. But he didn't care. He was on holy ground.

They walked along a path of cleared brush for a good two hours. Then all of a sudden, the Elder entered a thicker and untrodden part of the forest. He walked, dragging his canoe for another twenty five minutes until there was an opening in the forest and they arrived. They arrived at the shores of a lake. This place looked like no other human had ever set eyes on this lake. Untouched by humans. To say it was magical, would be to diminish the awe that Elijah felt. The reflection of the stars and on the lake along with what looked like the green of Northern lights made the moment even more holy. The sky was torn in the middle by a darker blue while the two sides of the sky seemed to shine light blue... all this because of the glory of the galaxies that were emanating their light. In the dead center of the lake there was a beautiful tree. Actually it looked like two trees. But it was one tree that seemed to

grow right out of the center of the lake. One branch reaching to the stars. The second branch, leaning horizontally, drawn by gravity, eventually curved up. Right there. In the middle of the lake. The stars and the moon were so bright that the tree cast a dark shadow on the lake. In the distance, the Enoch Trees lined the rest of the shores. In the distance, two decently sized hills formed a valley in the horizon. Elijah's breath was taken away.

Esther. I am here. This is the place. I have found where I want to live and die. I never want to leave this place.

The beauty of the moment along with the beauty of the Elder— it was all so overwhelming for Elijah. He was pulling a St Peter— who when he was on Mount Tabor and the Lord Jesus was transfigured, the only thing St Peter could say was... it is good for us to be here! Elijah was somehow witnessing a transfiguration of sorts. The Elder was completely and wholly a part of the scenery. He was not apart. He was, like the solitary tree in the middle of the lake, bringing so much uniqueness and beauty to the moment. Millions of beings at this very moment in this very place were dying. And millions more were being born. Fish. Plants. Insects. All here. All at that very moment. But the Elder, was different. He was a carrier of the Image of God. He was a carrier of the Great Spirit. It was as though all of creation had come to his departure in order to send him off. From beauty to fuller beauty. From life to deeper and fuller life. From *Chronos* to *Kairos*. Elijah was so thankful to be alive in this very moment.

The Elder stood at the edge of the lake. Lifted his hands up to the sky. One arm straight up to the sky. One arm to the right. Elijah wasn't sure if he was mirroring the tree in the lake on purpose. Elijah somehow understood that this too was *Zaagidwin*. This was a summary of his life. His left arm, pointing up was an icon of his love for the Creator... and his right arm was an icon of his love for all of creation. And just

as the tree curved upwards, this is what he did with all creation... he was offering it all up to the Creator in thanksgiving.

The cross! Esther that's the cross! The Beloved... in loving Him... we love vertically and horizontally... Esther... please tell me that heaven will be as beautiful as this.

Sweet Elijah, you have no idea. No eye has seen...

The Elder stood there for an hour. For Elijah, this time flew by. He was afraid of the moment where the Elder would end his time of prayer. He wanted him to remain like this at least for another eighty years. But he knew what was coming.

The Elder got on his knees and began to dig the rough sand beneath him. He was digging with his hands. It was clear he was preparing his burial place. Elijah almost ran and threw himself to the ground next to him. His eyes flooded with tears. He was now digging a hole for his beloved Grandfather to lie down in. It took the two of them an hour and half to finish. Chief Billy grabbed the birch canoe and placed it in the hole that he had just dug.

The Chief stood looking at his work. His last work. He was thankful. He called Elijah over to stand in front of him. He slowly lifted his hands up to Elijah's face. He held him, like a father would hold his son. He looked him in the eyes for a long time. He bent Elijah's head forward and kissed the crown of his head. Elijah exploded into uncontrolled tears. The beautiful Elder pulled him into his arms into an embrace.

My dear Elijah. Don't weep for me. I return to my Creator. My life will be so united to the life of the Great Spirit. Don't weep for me. I return to Zaagidwin. Into His arms.

Elijah was holding on to the Elder with all of his strength.

Esther. I don't want to lose him. I don't want to lose him. What's next for me? I am so lost! I need him to give me direction. Please Esther, can you ask God to delay his departure? Maybe one week? Or two?

When Elijah could physically hold on no longer, the Elder gently led Elijah to sit next to the canoe. He stepped in. He sat and stretched his legs out. He laid down on his back. Crossed himself. Pulled out Pete's crucifix that he had given him. Placed it on his heart. Crossed his arms. Turned to Elijah one last time.

Please bury me right away. Then cover this spot with Enoch Tree branches.

He winked at Elijah. The Great Spirit had informed him about Enoch Trees.

Meegwetch my beloved grandson... I love you. *Meegwetch*. Become earth... so that one day you can become *Zaagidwin*.

Chief Billy, the beautiful Elder from Elijah's dreams, smiled deeply... closed his eyes... and went home.

Exactly at that moment, Pete got up from under the tree and went to sleep. His vigil was complete.

Unknowingly, both Elijah and Pete, at that exact moment said:

Meegwetch Chief. *Meegwetch*.

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Isaiah

When Elijah woke up, it took him a few moments to remember where he was. He sat up abruptly. He had dreamt of flying canoes and free-falling bald eagles.

The Elder! My beautiful Elder!

The memory of the previous night came to him all in a flash. The Elder standing at the edge of the lake. The digging. The lying down. His last look. Elijah's getting on his knees and burying the Elder with his bare hands. His covering of the Elder with Enoch Tree branches. His lying down beside him. Flat on his back. Arms crossed. Staring at the stars. Falling asleep to the words repeated over and over... *Meegwetch* Chief. *Meegwetch*.

Elijah now lifted up his hands and saw that earth covered them. Less than a year ago, he had buried his sweet Esther with his bare hands.

Esther. Please take the time to show Chief around heaven. I don't really understand how time works where you are... but enjoy your time with him... he's really really special. To be honest... he's taught me a lot... but now I have to take it all in... I am kind of feeling a little lost now. Do I stay here? Do I go back to the reserve? Do I go back to Ottawa? I know... you guys are probably having a party without me. Well, I won't keep you for

too long. But I would love if you could ask the Beloved to direct my path. I am His. Meegwetch.

+ + +

Elijah trekked back to the campsite, still barefoot. Still painful. He wondered how anyone in the community would find out about their dear Chief Billy. Then he understood the Chief's plan. He only told Pete, and Pete would let the community know. That made sense with the Chief's character. In his deep humility he probably didn't want to trouble anyone with a funeral or anything of the sort. He wanted to return to earth. Earth to earth. And yet, he really was so much more than earth.

Oh... what was the word for humility again? All I remember is Zaagidwin and Meegwetch... what was the word?

This prompted Elijah to sit down and reflect on all that the Chief had taught him. He taught him how to recognize his createdness. He taught him about the seven grandfathers. He taught him about thanksgiving. Seeing life from the perspective of earth... as the receiver... thankful for everything. As Elijah sat remembering, contemplating and pondering all these things, he had a moment of epiphany.

Though the Elder was teaching me about becoming earth... he was so much more than earth. Becoming earth can't be the end goal... it is actually only the starting point.

This one thought had such an effect on Elijah's soul. Up until this moment, because of his great love for his Esther, he had made his life goal to become earth. And yet... the Beautiful Elder was so much more than earth! His voice was ringing in his heart...

You see Elijah, earth doesn't have anything of its own. It offers nothing. Earth is the great receiver of everything. Earth receives the seeds. Earth receives the water. Earth receives

the heat and light from the sun. Earth receives the oxygen it needs. Earth is nothing on its own. Earth receives...

Becoming earth is just the beginning... of course! Earth is just the beginning!

With his newfound discovery, he found himself so excited and zealous at beginning his new journey. He had been in the negative and was moving closer to zero. Earth was not the goal... just the beginning. He got into Greg. Drove one more time through the old reserve. He paid homage to all the lives that had once lived on that sacred land. He loved the people of his beloved Chief. He loved his soft people. He knew that the gift that the Elder gave him was far greater than the teachings, or his words... it was himself. He was good earth... bearing fruit. It was so fitting that Chief Billy be buried by the lake... for it was earth, covered with water... bearing life in its center... a tree... of life... a cross. Elijah got back on the dirt road.

Farewell my beautiful Elder... thank you for everything...

This time, the only stops he took were for gas. He was a man on a mission. He knew where he needed to go... kind of. The Great Spirit knew and that was enough for him.

+ + +

Elijah drove for fifteen hours straight until he arrived to the big city. The moment he hit the three lanes of highway 400, which quickly turned to six lanes... he was completely and utterly hit by culture shock. He thought of how beautiful the forest had been... how beautiful the lake had been... and now, there were lines everywhere. Signs shouting commands at you. One way. Exit here. McDonald's 2 km away. Yield. Consume this. Watch that. Beware of this. Do that! Although,

Elijah had only left Ottawa a little less than a week ago, he felt like he was completely disconnected from city life.

Then there was the madness of the dreaded Highway 401. That's right. The 401. Sixteen lanes of human madness. Eight lanes going East. Eight going West. Four express. Four collector.

Humans were not meant for this. How can one become earth here?

My sweet Elijah, (Esther responded, though the question was not directed to her) earth is a matter of the heart. The Beloved has found good soil in the hearts of men and women... even here.

Elijah tried to keep focused on the road. He needed to take Highway 401 West. Then follow the signs for the airport. This took him to Highway 427 North. He guessed terminal one. He parked Greg. Said thank you to Greg. Actually he said *Meegwetch* to Greg. Greg was unaffected by Elijah's gratitude. He entered the airport. He was determined to take the next step. And in order for him to take the next step... he needed to return from his exile. He needed to go back to the motherland... that's right. Elijah was going to Egypt. He needed to find *Uncle Onsi*.

+ + +

AC251	8:01 PM	YYZ - YUL
MS786	11:47 PM	YUL - CAI

Now to an untrained eye, these may seem like simple airline and airport codes. But to the many who have experienced these exact codes or their variants know... they know... oh do they ever know that MS stands for Egypt Air. The year was 2002. Every time one of their planes landed, everyone clapped. Everyone. A nervous and thankful clap. Whether they

crossed an ocean, a desert, a city or a pond. Everyone clapped. Egypt Air dramatically improved in later years.

To Elijah though, the flight felt extravagantly luxurious. His body and mind had forgotten comfort. Somehow, to him, it was not comforting. All he could think of was water faucets — and how dangerous they were to humanity.

+ + +

Elijah had never been to Egypt. Never. He could not be ready for what he was about to experience.

+ + +

Heat. Heat plus dust. Heat plus dust plus pollution. Elijah's Canadianized Egyptian lungs were not ready for it. When the doors of the air conditioned plane opened, Elijah gasped. He couldn't breathe. It felt like an elephant sat on his face.

Is this what asthma feels like? Lord have mercy!

I AM.

Elijah deplaned. Went through security. Elijah had purchased a visiting visa right when he had arrived to the Cairo airport. The border officer didn't ask him any questions. He had a pad and pen ready if he did. With his backpack on his back, he stepped out of the airport. There it was again... the elephant. The heat felt oppressive to him. It was only June! He had no idea!

And yet, something in Elijah's veins was activated. A sense of belonging. A sense of being alive. He looked around, and everyone looked like an *Uncle* or a *Tante* from church. Now obviously, as he would discover, the majority of the people around him wouldn't set foot in a church. But the familiarity was magical. He quickly got used to the elephant.

Masr. Om el donya! I am so honored my love to be on the soil that carried both you and Mama... at different times... obviously.

Elijah took it all in. He was in Egypt. The taxi cars. The palm trees. The different color of the sky. The smell of gasoline. The people asking to help. The people selling things. The soldiers with their rifles just hanging on their shoulders like they were water guns. The honking... oh the honking of cars. A never ending symphony to bring harmony and order to the chaos of Egyptian driving. Elijah had no idea!

Elijah decided that he wanted to go to Shobra first, before he went to *Uncle Onsi*. He figured he would take a pilgrimage to Esther's home town before he set off to Anba Bola's monastery. So he walked up to the first taxi, showed him his notepad with the word *Shobra*.

Eh-were in Shobra? I no sbeak Engalish.

It's OK. I don't speak at all!

Elijah just pointed again to the word *Shobra* on the pad. And he jumped into the car.

And then it happened. Elijah. Experienced. His. First. Car. Ride. In. Egypt. There is no way to describe the dynamics of driving in Egypt. Elijah noticed that every time he would have pressed on the breaks the taxi driver simply honked. He noticed that the lines drawn on the streets to mark the different lanes were simply there for decorations. For example, though Elijah didn't know this, the street he was currently on was called Sallah Salem. It was a three lane road. In actuality, there were times where five cars were driving side by side along with a donkey pulling a cart and a motorcycle systematically weaving through all of them. Green meant go. Yellow meant go. Red meant go. Elijah was fascinated. The taxi driver seemed to get a kick out of Elijah's reactions to the driving. As an experienced taxi driver, Atef took pride in his maneuvering and threading through the lanes.

How is Amrica?

Elijah didn't answer. He just gave him a thumbs up.

Atef laughed. He gave him a thumbs up too. Elijah noticed the tattooed Coptic cross on his strong, tanned and calloused hand. Elijah smiled. Both of Elijah's parents had tattooed Coptic crosses on their right wrists.

It is important to note that for Coptic Christians, the tattoo was a major statement of faith. It was a declaration of their unchanging commitment to their beliefs. It was a "we are not changing no matter what you might do to us". Often, a person would walk up to another person, shake hands and flip their hand over to look at their wrist and see if they were Christian or not. In response, Copts started placing the tattoo on the back of their hands... in order to save the person in front of them the time of flipping their wrist over to find out their religion. One's religion was everything in Egypt. In fact, it was written on one's personal ID card. Well, Atef had a tattoo on his wrist and on the back of his hand. There was something about him that reminded Elijah of the Chief.

Atef.

Many of his clients had come to love him and call him *Baba Atef* and their children called him *Gido Atef*. He had six kids and his wife was very ill. He worked fifteen to seventeen hour days in order to provide for his family. He almost never worked on Sundays. He mostly drove privately for people—hired by the day. But for some reason, he was at the airport that morning. He had no idea how precious to heaven his current cargo was. Unknown to Elijah, God had orchestrated even this... his taxi driver. Atef was from Upper Egypt. Most Copts claim their ancestry from Upper Egypt. Like many, he left Upper Egypt, which is actually southern Egypt, and came to the big city to make a life for himself. Taxi drivers are necessary in a city of twelve million by night and nineteen million by day. Commuting in Egypt was akin to some form of medieval idea of purgatory. Many modern saints were taught patience and dispassion on her roads. There was always an

opportunity for humans to expand their hearts. Cairo's streets were master teachers of virtue... if one chose to be taught. Atef was one of them. He was strong... but unmoved by the chaos of the roads.

Elijah enjoyed his drive to Shobra. Everything was new and exciting. Fruit stands. Architecture. Signs. His favorite were the signs written in English... these signs were clearly written before Google translate was ever a thing. Atef dropped Elijah at *dawaran kholoosy*. He figured that Elijah would walk down Shobra Street and figure things out on his own. Before Elijah paid Atef the 30 Egyptian pounds for the ride, he showed him his notepad. Elijah had drawn a monastery and wrote the words Anba Bola Monastery.

You go see *Abouna* Fanous? You go see him? You have beroblem? You sick?

Elijah had heard of *Abouna* Fanous from his mom. She had told him that there was a mystic whose hands light up at Anba Bola's monastery. Elijah quickly thanked God for this small mercy of connecting the dots for him. Elijah nodded his head vigorously and gave him a thumbs up.

Atef burst out laughing and gave him a thumbs up.

I go zere. Sunday. You come. Free. I frind wiz *Abouna* Fanous. I frind. He bray for my wife. Sunday. Six za morning. I wait you here. Oh-kay?

Elijah scribbled a quick thank you— he almost wrote *meegwetch*— and drew a very big smiley face. He gave him another twelve thumbs up in his excitement. Atef exploded in laughter and drove off.

It was a Thursday.

+ + +

He spent the following three days discovering Shobra. He walked down all the side roads. He wanted to make sure he visited all the possible streets that Esther had walked. He

found *Mallooka's* church. He guessed which was her apartment. He tried to imagine young Esther looking out of her window. *Mallooka* smiled as he was doing his rounds when he noticed Elijah staring up. Elijah's guardian angel graciously nodded his head at his chief in command. *Mallooka* graciously nodded back. He decided that this was where he would spend his nights. Sleeping, leaning on the fence of Archangel Michael's church. He figured that it would be the safest.

He discovered mangoes. He decided that he had never tasted a real mango before. The taste of a nice juicy Alfonze mango was mind boggling. He felt somewhat betrayed or cheated when thinking of the mangoes he ate back home in Canada... one could hardly call them mangoes. This was true of the majority of the fresh fruit he basically lived on.

He also discovered sugar cane juice. He found it fascinating that people just drank out of the same cup. They hardly rinsed it in between. They didn't use disposable cups... they just drank from the same glass cup.

This would not pass back home.... Home. Where is home right now? What does home even mean? Esther. I officially don't have a home. I feel as poor as a sparrow... and as free and cared for as a sparrow.

Free he was! He walked the narrow side streets. He loved how cars were still somehow able to maneuver their way around seemingly impossible situations... while children, animals, bikes and scooters all pretended that the streets were solely theirs. Elijah became familiar with the different shops on the main street. His favorite place to frequent though were the Christian bookstores. He couldn't believe how everything religious could be all crammed into one bookstore. You name it... they had it. Key chains with saints pictures? Check. Patriarch's outfit? Check. Incense? Check. Glow in the dark statues of Mama? Check. He never knew how

much religious paraphernalia one could own. A lot seemed to him to be the answer.

His favorite time in Shobra was for sure between 4 AM and 6 AM. Those were the only two hours he had of solid sleep.

Esther. I am so sure that you were sleep deprived as a child! When do your people sleep? The streets are packed till 1 AM!!! I just wanted to say... I miss you. It's kind of hard to be here without you. But it's all good. I just miss you sometimes. OK... ALL THE TIME. No point in pretending. It has been weird for me to go from the extreme serenity of the northern forests of Ontario to the liveliness of a major global metropolis. But, my comfort is in knowing that tomorrow morning I will be making my way to Uncle Onsi. Can you please give him a heads up? Not sure if it works that way. Anyways. I better finish my evening prayers... because I am about to collapse any second now. Good night my love... I mean... good morning... I mean... proceed... do your thing.

+ + +

Something woke Elijah up at 5:47 AM on Sunday morning. He got up and ran to the meeting point previously decided with Atef. He was exactly a thirteen minute walk from the church of the Archangel. He thanked the Lord again for these little mercies. He arrived and Atef was standing outside, leaning on his taxi car with his arms crossed. He donned a big smile.

Come my frind. Come. We see za big saint.

Elijah got into the car. Looked at Baba Atef. And fell asleep. He dreamt for 247 kms. He dreamt of a man, wearing a handkerchief on his head with glowing hands welcoming him to the monastery. But instead of inviting him closer, he kept pointing away from himself. He kept directing Elijah to look outside of the monastery walls.

Mister. My frind. We is here. Woke up. Woke up.

+ + +

Elijah woke up with renewed energy. He was so excited to find *Uncle Onsi*. He had no idea how he was planning on finding him, but he was excited and anticipated help from above. He felt like everything in his life was being orchestrated. Just a few days ago he was with Chief Billy and now he was by the Red Sea at a monastery. Mind boggling! His heart was ready. He held his hands together and bowed his head to Atef in thanksgiving. Atef had been God sent. He was the proof of God's love for him... very concretely in that particular moment.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You have no idea how thankful I am.

He looked around. Atef had pulled up to the outer wall of the monastery. A monk came to the taxi asking for Atef's ID card in order to find out if he was Christian or not. Atef showed him his tattoo. That was sufficient. The monk asked about Elijah. Elijah handed him his passport.

Welcome my friend. Welcome! You came all the way from Canada. You are welcome to Anba Bola's monastery. Come in. Please come in.

The monk's English was perfect. Elijah thought that strange. But he didn't think more about it. They drove into the monastery through what looked like an archway that must have been over a thousand years old. In fact, this was one of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world. The beauty of the ancient walls bleached by the sun really affected Elijah so deeply. He took it all in. He had a really deep sense of peace. He could feel that holy men had lived here and had become earth in their pursuit of God. It was tangible. It is like everything emanated an unseen radiance that made every stone, every palm tree, and, he was sure, every monk in this

monastery vibrate at a frequency that was completely attuned to the love of God.

Elijah, for the first time in decades, felt a sense of reverence and awe at his surroundings. He would almost even dare to describe it as fear. This was the temple of God. It was clear that God Himself dwelt here. Emmanuel. God with us. If he felt such awe and fear at what he saw, what would he feel if his eyes were opened to the heavenly beings surrounding this holy place... the Cherubim and the Seraphim carrying the throne of God? He closed his eyes, fearing lest the veil be removed and he would be overcome by the greatness of the vision.

Woe is me a man of unclean lips. Please be merciful to me Lord.

Eventually he looked up and saw that Atef had stepped away and was speaking in an animated way with one of the monks. It seemed like the monk was shaking his head and saying no to him about something. Atef seemed to be getting agitated. He kept pointing to Elijah. Finally, the monk made a sign for him to wait. Atef seemed upset. After a few minutes, the monk came to Atef once again and shook his head. Atef walked up to Elijah and said to him.

I am sorry. I am very so sorry. The saint say he no see you. He say no. You leave outside. You leave the *deir* right away. I tell him. Belease. Belease let my Amriki frind come in. He say ehno way. The saint say no to you. He say to you go out. You no find what you eh-want here. I want to cry. I am very so sorry.

Elijah was devastated. The fear and awe turned into guilt and shame. He felt like the saint must have seen right through him. The saint must have seen how unworthy he was and that there was no place for him in this type of place. Elijah, stared at Atef, not knowing what to say or where to go. That's it. He had to leave the monastery? He didn't even get a

chance to ask about *Uncle Onsi*. He felt so deflated and so hurt. And yet, a voice in his head said to him.

Earth is nothing on its own. Earth only receives. And if earth receives, earth must give thanks for what it receives from the Creator.

Elijah recognized the Elder's voice. He thought of humble Pete, just sitting there, under the tree, listening. Elijah asked himself, how would Pete have responded to this situation.

Mama! How would you respond to this situation.

And more clearly than anything he had ever known, he felt like Mama would have simply obeyed. She would have simply obeyed and left the monastery. And so, Elijah followed his Mama.

He bowed deeply to Atef and to the monk. He gave thanks one more time with hands held closely together... and he turned and started walking towards the beautiful archway. His head was down— he was looking at his feet. He felt ashamed. He felt rejected by his own. Yet he opened not his mouth. He was led out of the monastery feeling like a criminal. He finally reached the outer walls of the monastery. He stepped out and looked around. Where was he to go now? He had no idea where he was. Dejected, he sat with his back to the wall of the monastery. He placed his arms on his bent knees and buried his head into his arms.

Elijah wept.

Oh my sweet Elijah, don't cry! *Abouna* knew that I was not in the monastery, that is why he told you to wait for me outside! Now come... let me see your face dear one!

Elijah could not believe his ears and he could not believe his eyes! There, in the flesh, stood before him a monk with a greying beard and a faded black cassock, whom he only recognized as *Uncle Onsi* because of his smile wrinkles. Elijah leapt into his arms, as a child would into his mother's embrace. He held on to *Uncle Onsi*— who had now become

Abouna Mina— and just wept. He wept out a year's worth of sorrow. He wept over Esther and his parents. He wept over the Beautiful Elder from his dream. He wept over himself. He had no control. He just melted in *Abouna* Mina's arms. All *Abouna* Mina did was whisper to him gently.

Oh my sweet Elijah. Oh my sweet Elijah, you're finally here. Oh my sweet Elijah, you made it. Weep my dear Elijah. Weep... that you may become all water.

+ + +

And so ends the account of Earth.

