

The Gospel According to Mary Magdalene

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Excerpts translated from the Spanish by Charlotte Coombe

1

Nearly ten years now in this city, and I have not come to terms with it yet. It would be more accurate to admit that this city, the hive of activity that is Ephesus, has in fact not come to terms with me. But that does not matter too much at this point. At last, I am preparing to put down in writing all that I have experienced. As much as I can in the time I have left. It will be no minor undertaking, and I am already old. I do not feel like an old woman, just as I never felt young, but my bones, especially in the long, brackish dawns of insomnia, they claw at my joints, dragging me towards the end. *Silence, my dear backbone*, I murmur calmly in those early mornings.

That's right, calmly.

I, Mary, daughter of Magdala, called the Magdalene, have reached that age when I no longer fear the modesty I have never had. I, Mary Magdalene, still possess the undiminished fury that impelled and still impels me to confront the idiocy, violence and steel that men wield against men, and against women.

But I will not write out of fury, because I have resolved not to. I have set out to do it the way a bird might weave a nest; meticulously, with love, and looking towards the future. A nest that will not be occupied by me, but by those in need of shelter.

I am old, it is true. I have lived too long now. My age is not important. I know that I will die soon. I do not understand why people make such an attempt to count the years, one, fourteen, thirty... What should be counted are the events, the times of pain and glory, the times of love and violence, the beauty and the infamy we have contemplated.

Life is not merely a tally of dates, but the memory of emotions and events, of failures and lessons learned. What would I achieve by leaving behind an inventory of all these years? A single year can hold the entire future and past. I have had the great fortune of

seeing the light that emanates from bodies and from science. In the midst of so much iniquity, so much vain cruelty and mutilation against the earth, there is much that I, Mary Magdalene, have come to know. And in that knowledge, the essence of my being will endure throughout the ages.

Because no knowledge is futile.

My decision to put down in writing what I have seen—the extraordinary events that I was privileged enough to witness for no greater merit than my mere presence—is firm. And it grows firmer as I become more conscious of the braying voices bent on falsifying what transpired, appropriating the reality of what took place, and tailoring it to the size of their own body, altering the reality to suit them. Sadly, this is also known as memory. A falsified memory from which to profit.

Writings have reached me, tales, lies that seek only to sully what we experienced together, with the man who is called “the teacher” by the very people who at the time renounced him. Betrayed him. To profit from it, that is their goal, to become wealthy, to accumulate power, to satisfy their vanity. There is no sin in it, but there is misery, blindness, stupidity, and pettiness. Their idiotic thirst knows no bounds.

But I was part of it.

I knew the Nazarene. I was the only one who never left his side. Never. Not out of vanity. That is simply how it was, what happened, and who I am; it is what we saw in each other. I am sitting down to tell all, to erase the many lies, and to make his true ending known. Nothing will be recounted in vain.

2

We left Magdala in the year 62. Magdala, my port town, my city on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, my house, our source of life. Simon Peter and Paul of Tarsus were alive then, and the devastation of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple were unimaginable to us. Accompanied by John, we persuaded Mary, the mother of the Nazarene, of the need to leave the region, aware that her body, her sparrow’s physique, was breaking. We set out over land to Tyre, and from there we sailed to Ephesus. Mari

died not long after setting foot here. She was already little more than a sigh. It was a journey of parched rock, of sun and wind, days of lashing rain and the lurking shadow of violence that pervaded reality through the ominous cackling of the hyenas.

Thirty years on, after the disappearance of her son and having just arrived here in Ephesus, I decided to ask her about it.

Thirty years! My silence up to that point was not out of cowardice, but respect. I watched her fade, prostrate, after that journey that had clearly been too arduous for her. Beneath her translucent skin, her skull was all hollows. I have never seen such a lengthy struggle, such a determination to cling to life.

‘Aren’t you resentful, Mary?’

She gazed at me with that look of hers, a mixture of weariness and astonishment.

‘Do you think that would do any good? Should I have given them my life as well? No, I think not. Carrying resentment within me would only mean sacrificing myself.’

‘I understand.’

‘I don’t understand; often have I found myself unable to grasp anything that has happened. Not even now.’

‘But there is peace within you.’

‘We are different.’ Her voice was a fine, taut thread. ‘Those things seem important to you; what is or is not within me, it matters to you.’

‘Does it not matter?’ Even as I asked the question, I knew it was a mistake, her way of accepting, of surrendering, was an old rag that I had handled too many times. Mary had always fulfilled her role as a mother, as part of her tribe, without question. In this, we were radically different.

‘No, I don’t think so. Life is over for me, life has passed through me, that is all. At times I did think that our actions could change what is to come, the things that will happen.’

'You know that is my endeavour.'

We knew each other well; everything had already been said before.

'Yes. Only pain and words remain. My pain will go with me. I know, I know, the words remain. Do you know for how long? Can you answer that question? Can anyone?'

Sitting here, I still have no answer. I choose the words. I put them in order. In this act there is the hope that they will remain; that it is not a futile effort. I cannot allow myself to think that. Otherwise, what would be the point of this endeavour?

25

The rain was lashing down. I had dreamed that black women arrived from Meroë, in Africa, carrying Amanitore, queen of the Candaces, on a throne made from a dead, dried-up elephant. They sang with men's voices. She leaned towards me, but I was far away, so she outstretched her arm, which was a trunk, and brought me into the group. Then, the elephant was no longer a dried-up beast, and it began to move.

That day, people had taken refuge from the rain in their rudimentary shelters covered with palm leaves, and those who could find space sheltered in the port warehouses of Magdala or Capernaum. Rainy days were quieter, and we worked at a leisurely pace, without rushing. They called her the bleeding woman, and the only sin she had committed was going outside in spite of her constant bleeding. The blood flow was not periodic, but continuous. It happened, as we had seen at home, that some women who were already infertile suffered from often fatal haemorrhages. She did not live in Magdala; she must have travelled from some other city to meet the one who was supposed to be able to save her. She was an outcast. Her blood was intolerable to others. Women's blood besmirches the purity that society is willing to tolerate, or rather, that men and those who abide by their idiocies are willing to tolerate. Seen or unseen, the blood is always there, serving its expected purpose of begetting the children of men.

A few disciples arrived, carrying the woman above them, on their shoulders. They were soaking wet. At the door, the Giant took her in his arms and carried her to the tent where the women doctors treated people. The Nazarene had never taken part in a

healing before. It was his men who brought the sick to the house, usually outcasts, mostly curable. When he appeared, the women doctors were already doing their work, his mother among them. As usual, Simon Peter and a few other men remained outside in the street.

‘You’re tired, Magdalene.’

The Nazarene’s hair was dripping. His tunic was drenched.

‘Come inside the house. The girls will give you dry clothing and something to eat.’

‘Where is the woman?’

‘The woman is fine. Anna is taking care of her now.’

‘Is she going to die?’

‘I should be asking you that. Aren’t you the one who heals the sick?’

‘The ailments I treat have nothing to do with the body. I treat ignorance and violence. That is my teaching. Is the woman going to die?’

‘I don’t think so. And what would you know about violence?’

It could be said that the commotion around the bleeding woman, the blood, the Giant rushing in with her in his arms, had distracted the people in the courtyard to such an extent that they failed to notice the presence of the Nazarene. But in truth, they did not even recognise him. They would not have distinguished him from any other man entering the house. He looked like any ordinary man, neither taller nor shorter, just as unkempt, dirty, and rain-drenched as the rest, his skin just as dark.

We entered the large house, and I was grateful that his appearance gave me an excuse to slip away. My father, as well as a whole life spent among women of medicine, had educated me in the ways of cleanliness. I knew the pleasure of water, in large vats or smaller tubs, and of washing off the grime of the day by submerging yourself in it. The girls prepared the bath, warmed and perfumed the water.

‘You should eat something,’ I told him, once we were alone.

Completely naked, he leaned back against the edge of the tub, arms spread wide. Then his real face, the one I knew, the intimate one, wiped away the expression he had worn up to then. It's as if I see him now. With his head thrown back and the lump in his neck jutting out, he reminded me of a bird. He was all bones, his chest like that of a large, featherless bird, a carcass or a stringed instrument swathed in dark leather. Slowly, I stroked the ripples of his ribcage, with no intention of giving him rest. I moved up to his shoulders, to his jaw, his cheekbones, his forehead, his temples. With no intention of giving him rest. Recognising. We are the body, and everything is supported by the bones. It occurred to me that when there is nothing to cover the bones, only the head remains. I remember it with such clarity because I have never stopped thinking about it. I paused at the head. I felt that it belonged to me, and by merely thinking about it, it belonged to me. In that moment, he was mine. When he opened his eyes and looked at me, he was back again. He was himself again.

'You seem to have only eyes left, Nazarene.'

'It does not matter.'

'What does matter, then?'

'You know the answer to that.'

'I see you, and that transforms me. The fact of seeing you. Of you seeing me.'

'But you insist on stopping at the eyes, Magdalene.'

I kissed his right eye. I kissed his left. I leaned my back against his chest, my nakedness against his nakedness.

'We are these bodies,' I said.

'Our meaning is found in your gesture towards me.'

When the bleeding woman was healed, we brought the Nazarene. The women had insisted that she needed to say goodbye to him, to thank him. She left the doctors' tent

and dropped to her knees. Then she crawled on all fours, like a dog, to a corner of the courtyard and began to whimper for him. Night fell, and she was still there, disturbing everyone with her howling. It was clear she would not leave until she succeeded. To her, the female doctors and I were but the extra limbs of her true saviour, which was him, who she believed had worked the miracle in her womb, who had removed the viscera, sewed up the flesh, dressed the wound, reapplied the ointments and bandages.

The Nazarene entered the courtyard and the woman dragged herself over to his feet. She wept and wailed, thanking him over and over again for saving her. I thought she was a fool. Not only ungrateful, but a fool incapable of acknowledging the work of the doctors, the care she had received day and night from the apprentices and girls. Instead, here she was, prostrate before the man whose only merit was that he had ordered her to be brought to the house. She bowed her head so low that it rested on the ground beside his sandals. She clung to his ankles, snivelling at his feet, pressing her wet cheek into the arch of his foot.

‘You are healed,’ he observed, helping her to stand up. He brushed her hair away from her face, sticky with tears, mucus and mud, and invited her to leave. ‘Do not return to where you came from, and do not tell anyone what has happened.’

There you are, I thought, on hearing his words. I see you. There you are.

At that exact moment, hearing his words, I saw everything that he had in common with the false prophets who filled the roads and the shores; everything that was fraudulent about him. *There you are, pretender.* I remember I did not get angry. Of course it did not make me angry. What had I done to get where I was, if not pretend? What had I done, if not fashion a mask and then wear it? Everything changed then. It was that precise moment which has brought me to the place where I am writing these lines, four decades later, in my bony old age.

When I looked upon his face, the way I viewed him had changed. I had discovered what we had in common. At long last. It was not motives that we shared, but methods. We both wanted to tear down the powerful, the laws, the Temple, the widespread obedience, the tyrannical cycle of punishment and violence and punishment and

violence. That was the pretext. But my reasons for doing it were different from his; quite different. Nonetheless, we employed the same weapons, the same deception.

‘I know what you’re thinking, Magdalene.’ A playful spark of understanding danced in his eyes.

‘I don’t doubt it, beloved. You will know then, that from now on, explicitly, my fight is your fight, and your fight is mine.’

‘I’m surprised at how long it has taken you to realise.’

48

When they appeared, I was sitting on a rock waiting for them. I knew they would come. It had been three days since the doctors took away the Nazarene’s body, and another three that I had stayed there. There I slept, ate, waited. I could not stop thinking about my sea, about water, I woke up drenched in sweat, cursing that arid land, not knowing what I had dreamed. Word had spread that the tomb was empty. Several representatives of the Sanhedrin visited the place, and not one could get a word out of me. I learned from John that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had been taken away. A woman mattered little compared to those two witnesses. Witnesses to what? Simon Peter was leading the way, as if pushing back the earth with his feet. His face was ablaze with the heat of the sun, or fury, or both. As soon as I saw him, I realised that he no longer meant anything, that this man had no bearing on me, with that way he had of surging ahead, commanding the air to part for him, the way the ignorant shoo away flies that are not there.

‘Where is he?’ he roared. ‘Speak, woman! Where is he?’

Without getting up, I extended my arm and pointed to the empty tomb. Haughty.

He came closer, until I was within arm’s reach. I was not afraid. He gripped me by the shoulders so tightly that I could feel the place where the arms meet the body and I thought he might rip them from their joints. He lifted me off the ground and shook me fiercely. The others, who had been entering the cave and skulking around looking for

who knows what, came rushing over. I let him shake me. I did not want to show any feeling; I did not want to be anyone or anything to that man, not even a body to hurt. I wanted him to feel powerless. He was nobody.

A couple of men forced him to let me go. My shoulders and neck ached, damaged by one of the harsh jolts, but my face showed no trace of emotion or pain.

‘He is clearly not here,’ I said, meeting his gaze from a far-off place to which he would never have access.

‘Tell me where you have taken his body,’ Simon Peter spat out each word, clenching his fists like rocks ready to stone me.

‘Now you come to ask me this?’

The disciple whose name was Andrew stepped forward to address me.

‘He said he would rise again.’ His face was full of hope, begging for confirmation. ‘Has he risen again? Tell us, Magdalene, has he risen?’

‘You did not see him die. You were not even by his side during his torment,’ I replied. ‘Why are you interested in the resurrection of someone who, as far as you are concerned, has not even died?’

‘He said he would rise again,’ Andrew repeated.

Other voices joined his, claiming they had heard the same thing. That the Nazarene had foretold he would be killed and then rise again. They nodded amongst themselves, their shocked stupor turning to hope.

‘If that is so, then where is he?’ Simon Peter turned to face me again. ‘Are we to believe that he has risen only before you, before a woman, a common prostitute?’

‘Hold your tongue!’ shouted someone from behind him. I might have recognized it as Levi’s voice, had I made the effort to decipher it.

In that moment, he was compelled call me a prostitute, for the word “woman” did not seem insulting enough. His words had no effect on me.

‘The Nazarene is alive, but what does it matter to you, who scurried away like rats when he needed you most? He is alive, it does not matter how or where. He is alive because his word remains and will remain in the souls of those who have seen their lives transformed by listening to him. You went with him to Jerusalem, celebrating a victory you did not understand—how could you?— and doling out blessings of which you are not worthy. You are no more than a bunch of ignorant men, and I can only feel shame. Shame at having shared even a minute of my life with you. And yes,’ I said, looking at Simon Peter, ‘only the women were there, as they were so many times before. Prostitutes? We’re all prostitutes to an animal like you. All of you, who did not want to accompany him at the hour of his death, who did not want to see... why do you come here now?’

Nobody answered. My work was done. I had started walking in the direction of the city when I heard, at my back, a murmur of hushed jubilation. ‘He is risen, yes, he is risen.’

The murmur of idiots.