



TO KNOW THE QUEEN*

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& Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness; I have taken you by the hand and kept you. I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

—Isaiah 42:6-7

He sat in the shadow of the wall. High in the cell a small window shed a square of the morning light on the floor below. He looked away from it; he had not seen the light. He sat facing the wall. Neither did he see the wall.

Most of the time he could look at nothing but his hands. “I thought I knew these hands,” he murmured, as if they had a life of their own. “These hands I thought I could trust.”

He repeated to himself the details of the killing, but there was no solace in it. By now they formed a sort of chant, beginning with the turn of the key in the lock. He had been drunk when he loaded the truck that morning. He remembered fumbling with the key. He remembered again the point of the actual killing, the precise moment that he imagined separated life from death, the moment when her body hit the truck. No—it was the truck hitting her, or maybe it was the moment when she had been thrown clear of the truck. At the instant of recollection his whole body shook. But it was not enough. It was never enough.

He listened to his heartbeat, as he always did at this point, thinking, as always, that *his* heart was still beating. There was no way out. “If I were to take my own life . . .” he thought to himself. But that would be another killing, and perhaps more guilt. And so the chant went on, for almost a year now.

Except for the visits of the rabbi, he was alone. Actually he was angry with the rabbi, who had counseled him to “live in God through prayer and the mitzvot. Keep the Sabbath here,” the rabbi would say.

Whenever the rabbi visited, he would grasp him impatiently by the hand, demanding, “Tell me the secret! I want to know the secret!”

“Which secret?” the rabbi always asked him.

“You know what I mean,” he cried, angry that the rabbi should not know by now what was in his heart—the path to the Divine, the Way Out!—which seemed to him to be bursting from his body.

Finally the rabbi told him this tale:

Once there was a merchant who had become impoverished. What he wanted, more than anything, was to know the queen. She was known to be compassionate and righteous, and he felt that if he could only be near her, if he could but be in the company of her righteousness and her wealth, he would be happy.

He sought out the wisest man in his village, and asked, “How can I come to know the queen?”

“Why do you want to know the queen?” the wise man asked. “Do you want the queen’s power and wealth for yourself?”

“No,” the peddler replied. “All I want is to be in her company—to sit at her right hand.”

“What will become of your family?” the wise one asked.

“My children are grown and my wife dead. Who else is there for me to live for?”

“And who will serve your customers?” the wise one queried.

“My customers,” he replied, incredulous at the older one’s concern. “Of what importance am I to them?” He was not really listening anyway.

“They will be served by others. What I want is to be near the queen. What must I do?”

Now it happened that in his village this merchant was famous for his ability to remember long lists of numbers, and it was also known that he had always treated his customers fairly. But he did not know the meanings of things, so he thought himself of little worth.

“Very well,” said the wise man, who the queen frequently consulted about her problems.

That very day the sovereign came to learn of the poor peddler who could count, and she quickly realized that he could be valuable to her. For in the queen's court there was much miscounting, even by the court's most respected members. So she had him brought to the palace to sit at her right hand, to keep track of the royal counting.

Thus the peddler became a peer. He sat next to the queen, and he was cloaked in velvet robes. He occupied a great chair, although of course not as great as the queen's.

At first he felt almost ecstatic to be in the queen's presence. She was fair and she was good, just as he had heard. But as time passed he began to understand that it was not only the fairness of the queen, but the fairness of the law too that made her subjects whole in their petitioning, and he became preoccupied with that. It seemed to him that he was going to know the meaning of his life. Suddenly he remembered the wise one's question about who would serve his customers. In his preoccupation he began to make mistakes in counting. This angered the queen.

She demanded to know the cause of the counting errors. "Are you so bored or preoccupied that you can't keep your mind on our counting?"

"No," he replied. He explained his fascination with the reasons the queen used in granting or denying the petitions. "It's only that I want to know why."

In fact, in his own heart he knew that it was

more than that. What he really wanted was to bring the queen's righteous rule to the people in his own village, and he knew he would have to leave the queen to do that. He begged her to release him from service, to return to his village and family.

The queen thought a long time before she answered. "First you begged to be in our company, and now you beg not to be in our company? The benefits we granted to you are paid for by a lifetime of service. However," she added, "We can see you will serve us better among the people.

"So, you may leave the palace, but only on these three conditions: First, you must *live* the law that you have learned here. Second, you must always use your freedom to demand justice for yourself and all others. And third, you must never again seek to be in constant company with us. In these ways you can fulfill your obligation to us."

The peddler left the palace that very hour, with no more possessions than he had come with, yet not impoverished. Arriving in his village before nightfall, he was welcomed by his friends and neighbors as an intimate of the queen. They asked him when he would return to the palace, and they showered him with requests and petitions that they wanted him to make to the queen on their behalf.

"I am not going back," he answered. "The queen has given us freedom and the law, and these are what we need for a good life."