

The Snake Between Her Toes

“Hit him! Hit him hard!”

The owner of the voice capered left of my target, hopping and jabbing like Mohammed Ali. I let fly, landing a vicious right hook. My victim collapsed in a heap. He might have been crying. I turned to David. He was dabbing at his bloody forehead, avoiding my eyes. I was about to get in trouble, and no one wanted any part of it, even the kid I’d just rescued.

From the floor of the bus the bully’s cries had taken on an aggressive tone. Things he’d do to me, etc. Talking like that, he wasn’t a threat. I steeled myself and looked at the bus driver. I respected the man too much not to. Salvatore had driven my school route since kindergarten. He caught my eye in the mirror and nodded. I had his blessing. He’d wanted to kick the shit out of Connor for years. I smiled thinly; Sal probably spoke to Jesus as well.

I bent over the kid on the floor. Now that I was up close he shrieked and wiggled away. I put my knee square into his chest and leaned close.

“Touch one more kid, make one more child cry, and I will...” here I paused, what would I do? This kid got away with being a bully for a reason. He was popular; a football star. I was the scrawny weirdo. Yet at this moment I had tremendous power over him. A fallen bully is vulnerable. What to say? Jesus came to my aid.

“Tell him...” Jesus struck a thoughtful pose, ridiculous in the setting of the yellow school bus. “I’ve got it! Tell him you will steal his soul! Sound like you mean it.” I nodded at him, not surprised. Jesus had the best lines—and a bit of a mean streak when bullies were involved. My pause, and the distracted *I’m-hearing-voices*-smile made the threat even better. I looked directly into the spot between Connor’s eyes, boring a hole through to whatever passed for a brain behind that handsome face.

“No matter what you do—I will know. Try being nice for a change. If you put a toe out of line...” pause for dramatic effect, “I will steal your soul.” This all came out in the gravelly whisper that passes for my voice. If the boy had come to his senses he’d have laughed. I was 95 pounds soaking wet; a wild, unkempt girl. Connor was a teenager on the verge of being a man, twice my size, and mean as a fisher cat. But I had Jesus on my side.

Today had started like any other day riding home on a yellow school bus. The popular kids sat in back; the geeks, weirdos and assorted pariahs sat up front. Sometimes there was safety in numbers. I stood,

The Snake Between Her Toes

as usual, my hand on the pole behind Sal's head. He always let me stand near the door, sharing his butterscotch candy. Sal knew I was terrified of the bus, but he had an icon of the Virgin Mary glued to the dashboard. The candy bag was looped over her outstretched hands. He'd made a space for me to set aside my fear and had become an important piece of the larger conspiracy that worked tirelessly to persuade me to attend school.

Connor, a newly minted senior, had always been a pain in the ass but now he was totally out of control. He stole lunch money and snacks. He shoved binders off seats, delighting in the explosion. For added fun Connor would 'accidentally' stomp on any seeking fingers that strayed too close to the scattered papers.

Jesus had taken to riding the bus with me, sitting behind Sal with the window down, relishing the diesel smoke. He'd explained that being dead gave him a new appreciation for sensory input. I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but I was pleased that he liked the bus. Made one of us.

That day he had turned to watch Connor, dark eyes narrowed. The target of the day held still as a quail in inadequate brush. The prey was David, and I knew he was gay. That had some serious stigma in the 1970's. I could see David cringe and white hot anger flashed in my heart. I didn't really do friends—people were too weird for me—but David was as close as I'd come. He was smart and a talented musician, two things worth respect. That may have been why I intervened. It also may have been Jesus.

"You know, they always misquote me." The tone of his voice caught my attention, he sounded disappointed and angry. Jesus was such a sunny character that this was novel.

"Yes." His voice was pitched so low it was almost a growl. Something about turning the other cheek. I preached kindness and understanding, but I never said *anything* about *allowing* cruelty."

I'd learned by now that no one else saw Jesus. I'd learned not to mention Jesus sightings to anyone. I was already too bizarre for 1978. People thought I was an alien. I'd tried once to tell my brother. It hadn't gone well. And I don't like restraints. So I kept my visions to myself. Since the first time Jesus had introduced himself, I'd paid attention, hoping to catch someone else noticing the tall, dark, and sort of handsome stranger. No dice. Jesus was still glaring at Connor.

I let go of the bar and moved closer. Sometimes Connor could be distracted.

The Snake Between Her Toes

Dave's face was scarlet; Connor's last comment had been sexual. Connor reached over and chucked Dave under the chin.

"What's a matter pretty girl?" He cooed. Wrapping his large hand around David's face, Connor gave it a hard shove, driving the smaller boy's head into the window. Connor was so busy being a dick he never saw me coming. A knuckle driven deep between his ribs got his attention. Gasping, he turned and made a grab for me. Of course, that was when Jesus egged me on and I dropped Connor like the sorry sack of shit he was.

I stepped over the body while Connor gasped out threats. I knelt back down and looked deep into where his third eye should have been. Stupid people don't get to have a third eye. But I could pretend. My knee on his sternum presented enough pressure to force Connor to hold still. His sputtering died out as I stared. My eyes went flat and reptilian, Gila monster style.

I made my little soul stealing speech, complete with my best killer lizard stare and a view of all my very large white teeth. It was pure domination. Connor went back to crying and making dire promises we both knew he couldn't keep.

Sal piloted the bus all the way to my house, backing my play. I marched off the bus with David hard on my heels. Jesus stayed on board grinning like a naughty boy. As the door closed I saw Sal glance in his mirror at Jesus. I snapped him a little salute. People with visions need to stick together.

I never asked to meet Jesus. I mean, who does? I guess that probably isn't true, there are lots of religious people who probably do. I wonder if they'd be disappointed. He certainly wasn't what I had expected. I mean, if you can expect anything from the divine. I also didn't ask him to follow me around, but now I was used to him. The first time we met? I thought I'd finally gone round the bend.

It had been an awful week. Nothing had gone right. I'd come home from school to find my father passed out on the floor. It was good I didn't have any friends to bring home, because I was never sure which father would meet me at the door.

My dad was a wonderful, intelligent and charming man. Sometimes. Other times he was a vicious drunk, vituperative and bitter. I had looked in a thesaurus to find the word: '*vituperative*.' I needed a special word to convey the depths to which my father sank. A brilliant man wallowing in his own self-loathing makes for a terrible companion.

The Snake Between Her Toes

I could never predict what would come my way. Dad was changeable as a river in a spring flood. Fast, deep, with hidden snags and floating debris, or bright and shiny with everything hidden.

That day he wasn't merely passed out. Nope. Unconscious *and* naked. I approached carefully. Brutal snores told me he was alive. Mother wouldn't be home for hours, so I had to drag Dad upstairs and into bed. I was furious; no teenage daughter should have to see her father naked. Icky.

I set him in bed in such a way that if he vomited he wouldn't aspirate, and then took away all his cigarettes so he wouldn't set the mattress on fire—again. In a vengeful mood I poured out all the vodka I could find.

When my mother came home I told her the whole story. This provoked a battle. Mom rolled out her litany of complaints against me; I returned fire. It was horrendous, made more awful by the way we fought. Never raising our voices, lips tight, grammar perfect. The vocabulary increasing in depth and complexity until ten minutes into the argument an average person would need a dictionary to keep up.

She didn't thank me for cleaning up after Dad— but she never did. We were in so much pain that we were unable to pierce the veil. Wrapped in fury, we struck like Kipling's blinded cobra.

We didn't speak before I left for school the following morning. The silence so loud it creaked.

So here it was, three p.m., and I REALLY didn't want to go home. I waved at Sal to indicate that I was walking. He gave me his little touch of the hat. Our town was small enough that a walk home was possible if a bit long. Our church was on the way so I stopped in.

It was ironic, my dad was the catholic; my mother had converted from her protestant faith when they married. Dad was a sinner of the finest water, and a closet pagan to boot. To counter this my mother had become a Holy Roller, embracing her new religion with zeal. She had her offspring baptized, confirmed, confessed and singing in the choir before we knew what happened.

The church was a lovely haven, decorated in pale blue and cream, the colors of Saint Anne. On the right side of the altar stood a statue of Mary, barefoot, astride the world, a snake pinned between her toes. I loved her barefoot with a snake. On the other side of the altar was a less interesting statue of Joseph clinging to a thorn branch. As usual I ignored him.

In another bit of irony, my father had taken up teaching Sunday school; addressing topics from standard Catechism to the Knights Templar. Dad taught us about the political marriage of Joseph and Mary:

The Snake Between Her Toes

the original power couple. Better yet, Jesus had married and produced children. Obviously this was not a popular idea, heresy even.

We kids lapped it up, researching families who were most likely the descendants of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. When I told my mother, as she was a direct line Plantagenet descendant, chaos ensued. Thereafter the Sunday CCD class was sworn to secrecy: Templar fashion. I have to admit that I enjoyed the idea that the lovely woman with the snake between her toes might be my great-great-whatchamacallit.

But this day I was not enjoying anything. I was tired of my parents and their twisted relationship. I was tired of adjectives: peculiar, brilliant, difficult. It was the beginning of my junior year. There was little enough to enjoy, and I sincerely hated most of my classmates.

Troubled, I sat three pews back from Mary, hands stuffed in my pockets, chewing on my lip. Even the church was no longer perfect. This summer our beloved parish priest had been reassigned and his replacement was hideous.

Gradually I became aware that I was not alone. That wasn't so strange, in those days church doors were unlocked at all hours. St. Anne's was still my sanctuary, creepy-touchy-feely new priest aside. Loving the church was a real gift from my mother. That was a new thought and I turned it over in my mind like brilliant crystal.

I sneaked a glance sideways at my companion. He was sitting exactly one row over, hands folded, head bowed. It was a quick look, but I recognized a man deep in prayer so I averted my eyes and looked back at Mary. I knew it was my rampageous imagination, but the statue had changed. Her usual Mona Lisa smile was replaced with, well; I could only call it a grin. Mary was smirking at the stranger.

My eyes wandered back towards the man. He was casually dressed, jeans, flannel shirt, no coat. The stranger was looking up at the nasty crucifix. I've never understood the Catholic Church's centerpiece of a tortured man hanging on a cross. Ours was well over 12 feet in length, with every painful detail lovingly etched in blood. I hated it.

If I died for my people—paid for their sins with my life—I wouldn't want people looking at my broken body. Why couldn't they have a statue of Jesus teaching, or fishing, or being holy in some benign way?

“My thoughts exactly,” said the stranger.

The Snake Between Her Toes

I often talk out loud to myself, but this time I was pretty sure I hadn't.

"May I join you?" He asked politely, moving closer. He sat near enough for conversation, but not enough to be threatening. I noted the courtesy. He was a stranger, and I was a suspicious young woman. On the other hand, given my mood, I would have been happy to beat the shit out of anyone who tried to hassle me, so I indicated that I didn't mind.

At first glance he wasn't the kind of man you'd write home about. His complexion was a pleasant coffee color and his rumpled black curls looked like he had spent too much time in the sun and wind. Homespun. But then he smiled and lit up the church. It wasn't a Hollywood smile, the toothy smile that brings to mind werewolves. It was a smile equal-parts merry and sad. His was the face of someone who has seen both wonderful and terrible things. Quite out of character and without a thought I held out my hand and introduced myself.

My hand disappeared into two extra large farm brown hands. One of my father's truisms came to me: 'You can learn everything about a person by their hands.' My new friend had large workingman hands, strong and calloused, but gentle. The contact should've been awkward, but it was peaceful. I told him my name; he held my hand in both of his and smiled. The moment lasted; I have no idea how long, but way too long for normal. Then he spoke.

"My pleasure, you may call me Jesus."

Of course I set that name aside, lots of people were named Jesus; it was only a weird coincidence. He set my hand down and gestured about the church.

"This is a lovely House of Worship. I understand you come here often." He went back to gazing sadly at the broken body on the cross. "I cannot understand the desire of the faithful to commemorate one of my worst days."

I had two choices, either this guy was crazy with delusions of grandeur, or I was sitting with the real deal. He patted my hand.

"Real deal," he murmured, "I like your turn of phrase."

I gaped a bit for lack of words. He turned that lovely smile on me and I made up my mind. I could do worse than meet Jesus in the flesh.

"Would you like a tour?" I asked, "The church is really pretty."

The Snake Between Her Toes

“Yes, I would like that,” was the simple reply, and that is how I spent the rest of the afternoon, touring the Son of God about St. Anne’s.

Jesus, for I refused to think of him as anything else, was an excellent guest, remarking on the statuary, the stations of the cross, the stained glass, and my personal favorite, the baptismal font. At that location I received yet another surprise, because he remembered my baptism.

“You were screaming and your mother was scandalized. Why an experienced mother would assume her baby would enjoy being splashed with water made no sense to me. It really got her knickers in a twist.”

“Now, how do you know that? Do you personally attend all baptisms?” I winced at my tone; I come off so harsh. My guest beamed, unaffected. “And what do you mean: knickers in a twist?”

“It is a colorful metaphor that indicates that the person in question is upset.” Jesus remarked, dipping his hand into the font.

“I know what it means, but you have to admit it sounds pretty weird coming from the lips of a man who claims to be the Son of God.” That made him laugh, and I found I couldn’t resist joining in.

“Young lady,” he remarked, “I have the command of the world’s languages, in both formal and idiomatic speech. With regards to your darling mother, it is an appropriate description of her on that day.”

I had to give him that, when my mother is worked up she looks like she’s suffering from a giant wedgie.

“I am delighted to find you so willing to take me at face value. How did you put it? *The real deal*,” Jesus continued. “It is not often that this occurs.”

“What do people usually do?” I asked, and then mentally kicked myself as his expression shifted to sadness. “I mean, you don’t have to tell me, it’s probably kind of personal.”

“No, it is worth discussing. Here, come and sit down.” We sat on the maple benches in the alcove. “Some people ignore me, or are not sensitive enough to see me, I do not know. Others curse me as a demon.”

“Whoa,” I hadn’t thought of that, “Isn’t that one of Lucifer’s favorite tricks, turning up in a guise of a holy man?” Silently I wondered if I was in danger and just as quickly decided that meeting either individual was worth the risk.

The Snake Between Her Toes

My thought made it across loud and clear. Jesus threw back his head and laughed. That made me cross, I hate being laughed at, and I was starting to hate having my mind read– but this man’s laughter was so infectious that soon we were both clutching our sides.

“Seriously now,” he continued when he could speak, “I do believe you could survive a meeting with a demon, in fact, a demon might leave your side feeling a bit put out.” Jesus refused to explain that little comment but went back to describing his other interactions with people. Apparently it all depended on the person and the circumstances. On the negative side Jesus sighting weren’t always seen as ‘healthy,’ and the unfortunate soul was ‘treated.’ He looked so serious I had to ask what he meant.

“It depends on the time and culture, here and now I might cause someone to be put on medication or be subjected to electric shock therapy, but in the past some of my contacts were burned at the stake. It is a dangerous thing, visiting humans. I am unable to predict how my presence will affect someone.”

“But it can’t all have been bad,” I asked, “or why would you do it?”

“There is a good side to this business. Sometimes I am viewed as a miracle or vision, on occasion I have been able to succor persons in need.” He looked so anxious that I nodded.

“You see, it is part of my job, to interface with the human world, to bring comfort, but it doesn’t always work out the way I have it planned.” He laced his fingers across his knees. I thought about not getting what you wanted, even if you were Jesus.

We sat in companionable silence for a while. I watched the light playing with the stained glass. I had to ask.

“Why me?”

“Why not you?”

“That’s not an answer.”

“There is no answer, I felt your pain and wanted to help. I did not expect you to engage me. Usually the people I am ‘helping’ feel a gradual lessening of their worries. *You* should have sat there– communing with Mary– gathered your thoughts and headed home in a better frame of mind.”

That was a mouthful, so I took a moment to think it over. That was *why* I had come here, to sit and collect my thoughts. I rarely prayed, but usually did leave the church feeling grounded. Jesus nodded; he was following my thoughts again.

The Snake Between Her Toes

“Few people pray. They sit in the pews, head bowed, hands clasped: the very picture of divinity. In their minds they are composing shopping lists, keeping track of lies, wondering about their family, thinking about sex and other inconsequential nonsense.

“You listen in on everyone?” There were about a hundred other questions ready to burst out, such as why here, why now, who was watching elsewhere, why he thought sex was inconsequential, but Jesus waved his hand at me.

“Too many questions, shall we handle them one at a time?”

We sat for a few more minutes; I guess I wasn’t sure what to say. It dawned on me that this silent conversation spoke volumes.

“You are not going crazy.”

“I’m glad you’re sure of that.”

“And there are not any privacy issues. I do not share what I know with anyone other than the person involved.”

“Somehow that doesn’t make me feel any better. I mean who appointed you in charge of watching me?”

Jesus wisely remained silent. Anything he might have said would have either sounded ridiculous, pompous, or both.

“How many people know about you, I mean the way I do, see you for real? Sorry,” I apologized instantly, “that sounded so stupid.”

“Actually,” Jesus paused and put a finger in the cleft of his smooth chin. It was a funny tic, as if he missed his beard.

“Why are you clean shaven?”

“What?”

“Don’t you realize that Jesus has a beard in virtually every painting, icon, or statue ever made, other than the babe in the manger bit?”

“I have been beardless for centuries, ever since Rasputin showed up and made beards look like a vile prop.” Jesus replied, reaching for his chin and then smiling. “I have been thinking of growing it back.”

“I can tell.”

The Snake Between Her Toes

“Am I that obvious?” Jesus went to touch his chin arrested the movement and bless him—blushed.

“Either you’re that obvious, or you’ve been hanging around stupid people for too long.”

“I explained to you. My job is largely hands off.”

“Sounds lonely,” I said, thinking about my mother and her nightly prayers. I never knew what she prayed about, maybe to have her daughter survive to adulthood? I did know that she cried when she prayed.

Jesus nodded. “Yes, prayer is powerfully sad for many people, even people who have much to be joyful about.”

“What a drag,” I said without thinking. “I mean, it must be very difficult for you.”

Jesus looked very stern for a moment, and then a rueful smile broke over his features.

“Yes, your slang is quite accurate, it is a drag, always has been, always will. It is rare that I contact with someone who is happy and satisfied. Some of the souls I meet are terrifying. Others are so sad that they tear my own heart in two. And always I am helpless.”

“That seems wrong, how can *you* be helpless?”

“One of the main rules is that I cannot actually impact the time line, even when I know what is going to happen.” Jesus’ face crumpled and a few tears crystallized in the corners of his eyes. “You cannot imagine the things I have seen.”

It only took a moment to realize what he meant. I touched his shoulder. His flannel shirt was soft, his shoulder warm and human.

Jesus took my hands in his, whispering as if in confession. “War, murder, rape, neglect, the violence is endless and often perpetrated in the ‘Name of God.’ It is, as you so succinctly put it, a drag.”

I felt sick. Then I got mad. “What do you mean you *have* to stand by, why can’t you get involved?” Jesus looked around the chapel as if the answer was in the tiled walls.

“There are rules. We are each allotted a certain time on earth to make a difference. After death, we watch, hoping to touch, to help.”

“To hell with the rules,” I frowned at Jesus, who was chuckling over my unintentional pun. “No—seriously—there’s go to be exceptions, there are for every rule.”

“Only when you are a teenager.” Jesus said.

The Snake Between Her Toes

“I refuse to believe that.” He shook his head, so I continued. “This is an exception. I’m an exception. I can see you. I don’t think it is a miracle, and I don’t think I’m having a psychotic break.” Jesus touched my forehead, making the sign of the cross.

“It’s early yet. There might be a rubber room in your future.” That seemed to restore his good humor, and we resumed the tour of the church. Hours slipped by, and I realized I still had four miles to walk home. I was reluctant to leave; worried that this was a one shot deal? Jesus ‘overheard’ that too.

“A *one shot deal*?” he asked, beginning to laugh again. “I enjoy your idiom, it is worth further study.” He swung a mock punch at my shoulder. “I believe we shall see a great deal of one another.”

“Really?” I wasn’t sure what else to say.

My mouth was hanging open. Jesus reached over and gently shut my jaw. “You look like a fish.”

With that he was gone. It was as if he had stepped through a door, closing it behind him. The church felt empty and a little cold. I walked out the front doors, taking a touch of holy water on the way out. The stars were beginning to shine, a beautiful night.