

## **A Friend**

By Kyle J. Smith

I have a friend I want to tell you about. As an adult he had a beard, a really fantastic beard and growing up his dad was really hard on him. He hit him with his hands and whipped him with sharp sticks but his words were the worst. He called him worthless. A waste of money, a burden on the family. Things like that stick around long after bruises heal. And his family was very poor. Meals were oftentimes just bread and milk and he never owned more than one pair of shoes, he'd just go barefoot mostly. Three times he got a cut on his foot that got infected, pussy, bloody. They had to cut one of his toes off to save the foot.

He liked girls, like you do, but they never paid him much attention. The smell, one, kept them away and this scar he had on his cheek.

His siblings, terrible stories too. He was the youngest and the sister just above him, she fell off a cart while going to market and got trampled by a horse. He saw all of it, the gore and his mother crying and he never forgot that. They didn't have the money for a proper burial, so there was never a grave for him to visit. And his oldest sister she was a prostitute and as a result the richest person in his family. But she caught a disease that got her real bad so her mind went soft and she died when her eyeballs started bleeding.

My friend, he got in his first fight as a teenager. He had made a little money, a few coins really, helping the blacksmith for an entire afternoon. He was sweating, his only shirt drenched, and there were burns on both of his hands and one of those hands was clutching his couple of coins, when two bigger boys started pushing on him. In the middle of the street they were harassing him back and forth. So he claws at one of their faces, tears a chunk off of their cheek. And this gets the other boy red so he rushes him and my friend raises his knee and gets this bigger boy right in the crotch while swinging up with the fist holding the few coins. He connects with his chin and this big boy bites the end of his tongue off. Both boys go running when my friend's dad approaches, swaggering, alcohol fumes coming out his ears. He grabs a rock, this father, right off the ground and smacks his son across the face. He falls to the ground and the coins go rolling. Big drunk dad picks up the coins and says, "Don't steal, boy." That's how he got that scar, the one the girls think is bad.

His whole life wasn't so dank, no there were lighter years. He caught up with this group of men traveling all over helping people. And he had a good position with this little company, he was the treasurer, handled all the money. The leader, he knew a lot, and he saw that my friend never had a lot of money and this meant that he handled money very justly, carefully. Which is a really good thing, I know I'd like to be better at that. He went around with these folk and saw all the things they were doing. Things he didn't think people could do. Making blind men see and healing lepers of their spots and saying great things about love. That there is a perfect love and that's God love and forgiveness is important too.

My friend did his best at his job. There were times when he needed extra help, he would wake up some mornings lying on a blanket on a dirt floor feeling like there just wasn't enough breath in his chest and he knew that meant he needed some more money, that's what was missing. It was the same feeling he had growing up when he'd eat dried bread crusts and watch his mother scrub the stains out of his father's clothes. So he'd help himself from the group's treasury, never too much, there never was much but he just had to make sure he would be okay.

He saw others being unwise with their money and it made his stomach turn. A lady, who never looked his way, broke an expensive bottle of perfume and poured it over his leader's head. This enraged my friend, for good reason perhaps, "Shouldn't we sell that perfume and give the money to the poor?" And he was honest, most of the money would have gone to the poor, only a little in my friend's pocket. But his leader

told him not to worry, the right thing was being done. My friend thought his leader a know it all, somewhat unattached from all the things that beat the human heart.

Dark thoughts seem to start right in the front of your head. They sit right behind your forehead, a cancer that people can see if they're looking in the right light. Then these thoughts begin swirling around your mind cave, picking up muck, treasures and grief until they take up your whole head and make it so heavy it tips towards one shoulder. This was the posture of my friend's head when he approached the Jewish leaders to discuss how to turn Jesus, his leader, over to them.

Don't simplify the decision my friend Judas Iscariot made. Don't make it bite sized and tell your kids about it while they lay in bed to scare the bejeezus out of them. Judas' breath had become the ashes of good intentions, his soul screamed until its throat went raw and he'd given up on God. The night before going to the Jewish leaders Judas stood in a room just like this and screamed at God till all he had was the ceiling above his head. *WHERE IS PEACE? YOUR SON IS HERE BUT ALL I FEEL IS THIS FLESH THAT HANGS WEAK OFF HOLLOW BONES.*

By the time he stood in the Garden of Gethsaname, kissing Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, on the cheek he had turned so far into his humanity that he no longer felt the wind; the wind that makes you notice how leaves change colors and fall to the ground so that new buds can take their place and carry the voices of bashful lovers to your ears.

The moment man gets a hold of any absolute, like love, it becomes tainted by our imperfections. Judas had so uglified every seed that God placed in his heart that the forest that grew within him was an infection of destruction. He was always one small step away from death without hope.

With the money he received for betraying Jesus Judas bought a length of rope and a field. One tree grew in this field. This tree, like all trees, started as a seed- looked like a weed as a youngster, a weakling as a sapling, and vibrant in its youth. It stood, on the day Judas bought the field, strong enough to withstand any wind. Judas choose a branch that he thought sturdy enough to bear his weight, the same mistake he had made every day of his life, and threw his rope over it. He tied that end into a knot and placed the other end's noose over his own neck.

“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”

For a moment there was peace. Judas' soul escaped the world that infuriated it, moving through empty darkness before entering the fire.

The weight of his death broke the branch, his body hit the ground with such force that his guts spilled out. His blood fertilized generations of doubt, my own even. His name became a curse, his memory an illness. His plight, forgotten.

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