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Ruth
...no other options
based on the book of Ruth
Boaz – a soliloquy
by Ralph Milton

This retelling of the story of Ruth could be quite upsetting to some people because it deals specifically with her seduction of Boaz, and what it means to be a woman. Then and now.

I am a decent man. I have a reputation to maintain. I live a decent life and say my prayers daily. I thank God for many things, and most especially I say the prayer prescribed for all Jewish men, “Thank God that I was not born a woman.”

Mostly I steer clear of women. They spell nothing but trouble, and in a small town like Bethlehem, there are no secrets.

So when I woke in the middle of the night, naked, my cloak pulled up to my chest, a shudder of fear ran through me. And then, in the darkness, I became aware of a woman beside me. I could hear her breathing. I could feel the warmth of her body. I knew I was in trouble. Deep trouble. My head was pounding and I felt sick to the stomach, from fear and too much to drink. What kind of mess have I gotten myself into?

It was the last night of the threshing season. Big celebration! Lots of good food and lots and lots of wine, and everyone ate and drank and partied till the wee small hours, until they passed out somewhere on the threshing floor. And yes, a lot of men and women got mixed up with each other – they do every year – but I always thought of myself as too smart to fall into that trap.

Now this. And I didn’t even know who this woman was. It was the middle of the night, but she put her face close to mine and whispered, “Boaz, I am Ruth.”

“Ruth? Ruth who? I don’t know any Ruth.”

“I am Ruth, the woman from Moab. I am the daughter-in-law of Naomi, your kinswoman. You were very kind to me and helped me glean grain from your fields. You protected me and gave me food.”

Then the whole thing came clear to me. I do her a favor. She pays me back by giving me her body.

“Damn,” I whispered loudly. Then more quietly because I didn’t want to wake up any of the other drunken bodies scattered around the threshing floor – “I thought you were something more than a prostitute. Do you think I let you glean in the fields just so I could get you into the sack?”

I could feel her stiffen and sit up. “I should have known,” she muttered. “I should have bloody well known that no *man* would understand this.”

“Quiet,” I whispered. “You’ll wake everybody up.”

“Let them wake up,” Ruth hissed. “I’ll give them a little lecture about what it’s like being a woman. A woman is just half a human, remember. I have no rights. I have no place I can go back to, and no place I can go forward to. I am a foreigner in this country, I am a widow, I have no father and no sons. All I have is a mother-in-law who schemes and plans and figures that if I come here and seduce you, maybe you’ll marry me. But you wouldn’t know what it’s like to have your back against the wall, to have no options, no choices and no hope. It’s no wonder you men pray, ‘Thank God I was not born a woman.’ I would too. Men have all the power and all the choices and I have no power and no choices except the power of sex and so I turn myself into a prostitute in the wild hope that you might marry me.”

I couldn’t see her in the dark but I could feel her anger and her pain. And I could remember her face. I had seen the grim determination in her eyes and in her body as she worked in the blazing sun from early morning till late at night, breaking her back to pick up the few little heads of grain missed by the harvesters. And I had heard her story gossiped in the streets of Bethlehem, how hope had turned to pain and death in her native Moab, of her dedication to her mother-in-law. I had envied her courage, her strength, her commitment. Now I could hear her deep and angry breathing as she sat there beside me on the threshing floor.

She was right, of course. Part of my daily prayer was to say, “Thank God I was not born a woman,” and now, suddenly, I knew why. I was far too weak to be a woman. I would long ago have been crushed by the pain and circumstance Ruth and Naomi had faced. “Thank God I was not born a woman,” because I could never do what Ruth had done, simply to stay alive. Nor did I have the loyalty and commitment she had showed, when she followed Naomi into a strange and distant land.

And then I knew I needed Ruth. Not for the sex and not for the comfort but for the sheer strength and will and hope that lives in such a person.

“Ruth,” I said. “If I can work it out, will you marry me?”

“No,” she said. “If it means death, so be it, but I won’t sell myself again, just to survive.”

“Not for your sake, Ruth. For mine. I have power, but you have strength. As a male, I have rights, but you have purpose. Without you, I am incomplete.”

There was a long, long silence. Then in the darkness of that threshing floor, she took my hand.

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
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