

THE

PROPHET

John Searcy

When they found him in the wall near Janna's cubicle, he was cold, nearly frozen, beard thick with the rustling of parasites and eyes like a cloudless winter morning. We used a mail cart to bring him to the conference room and laid him on the table, watching as he came urgently to life, coughing, blinking, wiping raw fingers along the stitches of his hairshirt. No one knew what it meant—a prophet, here, in our sad little office. We'd thought they only appeared in darker places, emerging fully formed from sites of calamity and suffering, like moths disgorged from subterranean cocoons. "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world," he choked, voice rasping, still unsure of itself. We gave him coffee, peanuts from the snack machine. He took a beam from a product display module and held it as a staff, standing on the sideboard near the half-raised projector screen and looking furiously past us, as if menaced by things vast and invisible.

"You have greatly suffered and will suffer still more in the future. The calamities that you hope so fervently to wish away grow stronger from your fervor, and these trials will bring out your cruelest inclinations..."

As he spoke, we shot each other glances. Surely, they were meant for others, these morbid prophecies. Not us, with our petty problems—our layoffs, hiring freezes, the temporary wall set up by the design area, behind which the sound of jackhammers, the rough, low din of construction. Cynthia was the first to give in, falling to her knees and asking if he could save us. Tim followed after, but the prophet seemed not to hear them, speaking on right through the lunch hour of sorrow and debasement, becoming gradually ever more personal: "And what know you of love, oh Charles from accounting? Have you once confessed your feelings? And Angela, Rachel, who will read your weekly inventory reports when you do not read the inventory of your hearts?"

After work, we whispered by the elevators, bundled in outerwear. Mostly practical matters: Where would he sleep? Who would clean up after him? As we spoke, the smell of sealant

wafted down from the construction zone, astringent, slightly sweet.

"You think he's dangerous?"

"Why would he be dangerous?"

"I don't know. They're dangerous, aren't they? I heard there was one up in White Plains who supposedly assaulted a woman."

"You heard that? Really?"

"I heard it on the radio. And there was one on Long Island who bit a three-year-old kid on the arm."

Two weeks later, he was still among us—pacing the hallways, interrupting meetings with his stentorian declamations. Before long, he grew tiresome. We had business to attend to, numbers to crunch. Security was called several times, but he always managed to slip through their fingers, so they'd end up in the lobby holding jumbled rags, a lamp, a pile of soot. Finally, we decided to confront him. He was in Gary's old office, standing at the window with the lights turned off, looking up Fifth Avenue at the endless black river of umbrellas. We approached him slowly, a crowd of five or six of us. Look, we told him. He turned to us, eyes muted in the half-light. Look, we told him. We appreciate what you're trying to accomplish, but the thing is we've got work to do. He raised his eyes, making a careful study of the ceiling panels.

"Is there..." He stopped, cleared his throat. "Is there some other business you'd prefer me to engage in?"

We started giving him little tasks around the office. He'd make copies, organize files, water plants, put together mailings for the sales reps. He worked hard, almost faultless in his diligence, as if he saw these jobs as penance, a form of self-mortification, and we felt vaguely guilty when he passed us in the hallway, head lowered and arms piled high with printouts. Eventually, we installed him in the little room near the copier, where we'd been storing samples from the warehouse. He had a desk, a computer, a cot behind the boxes where he lay in the nighttime—no one was sure whether he slept or not. Someone thought of calling him Jones, and the name stuck around: Where's Jones? See if Jones can take care of it. At first,

only Cynthia seemed interested in getting to know him; she would visit him occasionally in his white plaster hermitage and bring him snacks from the corporate cafeteria.

“What’s up, Cynthia? Going to see Jonesy?”

“Yeah. You know. I just wanted to check on him. Bring him food.”

“Food, right—good idea. I hadn’t thought of that. What does he eat, anyway? Is he like a dog where you can’t feed him chocolate?”

It’s true he had trouble with technology, always sending emails to the entire company at once, or getting his sleeves caught in the rollers of the fax machine. Such slip-ups were to be expected, but there were other problems too, of a more ominous nature—papers catching fire, adders creeping out from the undercarriage of cubicles, inboxes filling up with loaves and fish. They raised some eyebrows, these inconvenient miracles, but for the most part we accepted them—their presence no more intrusive than the sound of jackhammers coming in each day through the palisade of wallboard, the weekly missives from Human Resources, full of coded references to “stability” and “restructuring,” the sense of doom, gently impending, in the faces of the people in the halls.

At times, we sought his counsel, though few would admit to it. We’d sneak into his quarters when no one was looking, in search of some small assurance that things would ultimately be OK. He was kind to us, but firm, refusing to foster illusions or false hope and speaking only in oblique revelations. Sometimes, Cynthia would visit him for longer than the rest of us, and sometimes she would do this with the door closed. This led to talk, of course, and upon cross-examination she confessed that she’d been lying with him on his cot—chastely, she insisted, like brother and sister—and that when she lay next to him there with his arms wrapped around her, she was transported to the edges of the universe, and could hear angels singing, and feel the holy breath of God running over her. Tim, for his part, made no such bold claims, but said simply that Jones could make things with his hands—little scenes or tableaux from the past and the future, created from office supplies and pieces of

bread. And Tim would sit after work on the coffee-stained carpet and watch transfixed as Jones ushered his figures through the phases of history, building up citadels of whole wheat and push pins and then tearing them down again to lay in scattered ruins beneath the chairs.

One day, we came in and there was an email from Rob announcing an emergency departmental meeting. It was too soon, we agreed, for yet another round of layoffs, so we assumed it had something to do with Jones.

“Look,” said Rob, pacing awkwardly at the head of the conference room. “I realize this hasn’t been an easy year for us. And I think the powers that be, they realize that too. So we’ve tried to be lenient about the small stuff—you know, coming in late, taking long lunches or whatever. It’s cool. You know, do whatever you need to do. But this Jones thing...it’s problematic.” He frowned. “I mean, *legally*, it’s problematic. We had a woman come in here for an interview the other day, and her résumé turned into salt...”

Once again, we confronted him, once again crowded around him—filing into his office with faces low and guilty, chests heavy with the task that now fell to us. He looked up from his computer, seeming to know what we had come for. Jones, we said. He smiled, and took a sip of coffee. Jones, it’s not easy having to do this.

He stood up, raising an open palm. “It’s OK,” he said. “I understand.” As he spoke, a flock of doves burst from his hair. “No prophet is accepted in his own country. I shall walk the earth, like my fathers before me, spreading the word across the hillocks and the furrows of the land. It will be a time of testing, and of great tribulation. Is there any among you who would join me on this path?”

We looked at each other, with uncertain faces. A couple of doves came to roost on the upper surface of the half-open door.

“I would,” said Tim. “But I can’t really afford to lose this job now. You know. It’s a recession...”

Jones nodded, sympathetically. We cleared our throats, avoided eye contact.

“I’ll come,” said Cynthia.

“Are you sure?”

“I think so.”

“We will suffer great hardship—begging for our supper, sleeping in doorways...”

“I think I’m OK with that.”

Charles turned to her, sharply. “*Doorways*, Cynthia?”

“What’s wrong with doorways?”

He gestured broadly toward her shoes, nails, bracelets, haircut. As she examined these aspects of her physical presence, she gave a puzzled sigh, as if she wasn’t really sure where they’d come from.

“I guess you’re right,” she said. Then, turning to Jones: “It might not work out. I’d need showers, breakfast—I’ve never lived outside the city.”

Again, Jones nodded. “Each of us serves in his own way.”

He left with a minimum of ceremony, shutting down his computer and walking quietly out to the elevators. The next day, they moved most of the furniture out of his room. It was strange working without him, but things returned to normal pretty quickly—the last of the doves was captured on Tuesday, and the dead locusts in the break room were swept away at the end of the week. By the time we moved into our new open-plan office space, we’d all but forgotten him—the memory of his face grown coarse and illegible, like a document run too many times through the copier. Then one day in June, when we were busy getting ready for the sales conference in Baltimore, he was drawn back temporarily into focus.

“I’ll be darned,” said Tim, his voice reverberating through our bright, communal space.

“What is it?” asked Charles.

“It’s Jones,” said Tim. “He sent us a postcard. I didn’t even think he knew our address.”

On the back, the bold, hen-scratched letters were packed tight within the margins. The front featured a picture of the Santa Monica pier. We all took turns reading the postcard, then left it with Cynthia, who kept it taped to the bottom of her computer screen for several months next

to a *New Yorker* cartoon until she was let go at the beginning of the fall.

To my friends at Lysander Media:
Greetings from Sunny California!
Did it finally warm up there? I remember it always being so cold. Someday I must tell you the story of my travels, but for now, I just wanted to let you know I’m doing well. The people here are kind, and the tourists on the beach are excellent listeners. There are other prophets here too, would you believe it? They wandered out here like me, and after a day of solemn preaching, we get together and start bonfires on the beach. We lie on the sand, and drift to sleep amid the whispering of mackerels. Oh, my friends, it is good here. The days are so warm, and the sea just at dusk is so beautiful.

With love
and deepest
affection,

JONES