

THE RIGHT  
TOMB

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## THE RIGHT TOMB

"That's ridiculous!" Magdalen said. "There can't be two places where Christ was resurrected. Why can't they just get together on one?"

Daoud shrugged apologetically. It was, after all, not his fault that Anglicans had their own ideas about the location of Christ's tomb. He wasn't Anglican – she was!

"There's only one place where Christ was born," she ranted on. "Only one place where He was crucified. Why do there have to be two places where He was buried?"

Since he had no idea, Daoud just shrugged again.

They were standing on Nablus Road in East Jerusalem, just outside the garden that contained the tomb in which, according to Anglicans, Christ had been buried and then resurrected. It was a chilly April day, shortly before Easter, and Magdalen, a shapely woman just over forty, had on a black raincoat over her yellow wool suit. Although it was cloudy, she wore large, dark sunglasses to keep out the glare bouncing off the white Jerusalem stone.

"This is very unsatisfying, very unsatisfying!" she complained. "I came here for a spiritual experience. I thought I felt it in Bethlehem. I thought I felt it on the Via Dolorosa. I thought I felt it at the Holy Sepulchre. But here I felt nothing. I have to know it's the right place or I feel nothing."

Unwilling to shrug a third time, Daoud merely smiled.

"What are you smiling at?" Magdalen asked.

"It's not funny."

"Sorry, Ms. Brixton, I –"

"It's Maggie!" Magdalen broke in. "I told you. I'm not Ms. Anybody. I'm Maggie."

"Sorry ... Maggie." Daoud forced out the name as though spitting out blood. Calling a strange woman by her first name was as unnatural to him as pissing in front of her, and it was a terrible effort for him to do it.

He had to remember not to call her anything at all from now on.

"Well, where do we go from here?" Magdalen asked impatiently.

"The Western Wall," Daoud said. "We'll need to drive there."

In the taxi, Magdalen kept talking to the back of Daoud's head.

"Why did you take me there?" she said. "If I had never known about it, I would have been perfectly happy with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. That was where Christ was crucified, buried, and resurrected, all in one place. OK, that was it, one-stop shopping. Now it's all ruined. I'll have to go home not knowing whether or not I was in the right place."

Daoud said nothing, hoping the storm would blow over.

"I asked, why did you take me there?" Magdalen repeated with a nasty edge to her voice.

"You said you were Anglican," Daoud answered, careful not to address her by name. "We're told to take Anglicans to the Garden Tomb."

"Who tells you?"

Daoud shrugged. "Everybody does it."

"Well, you shouldn't," Magdalen said, annoyed that there was no one in the taxi with whom she could be legitimately angry.

As they inched along, Magdalen gazed out at the crowded, run-down street and wondered why she was there. She had taken her life in her hands and had spent a good part of her savings, and for what?

The disagreement about the location of Christ's tomb raised the question of whether anything she was seeing was authentic. The events she was retracing happened over 2000 years ago. How did anyone know where they had taken place?

"There is another tomb that people say is the right one," Daoud said tentatively, unsure whether he was saving the situation or making it worse, unsure which outcome he preferred.

"I've had enough of tombs," Magdalen said. And then: "Who says it's the right one?"

"That Hollywood director. The one who did The Titanic."

"Oh, yes, I remember that!" She hadn't actually seen James Cameron's documentary, but she had read about it, and had seen clips on the nightly news.

"The ossuaries had names on them," Daoud continued. "Joseph and Mary, and Jesus, son of

Joseph, and Miriamne, who is thought to be Mary Magdalen."

"Magdalen!" Magdalen laughed. "That's me!"

Thank God! Daoud thought. She's in a good mood.

"Take me there," Magdalen said.

"But the Western Wall," Daoud protested.

"I'll see it another day. I just have a feeling about this. Take me."

"It's a long way."

"What do you care? I'm paying you by the hour."

"But there's nothing to see there."

"What do you mean there's nothing to see there?"

"Just a concrete slab. The authorities won't let anyone in. It's all closed up."

"Then why did you mention it?"

Again, the ugliness in her voice.

"Just to make conversation. I wasn't suggesting we go there."

"Take me there," Magdalen repeated. "I want to be there, even if there's nothing to see. I have a feeling about this."

Daoud shrugged once again and pulled the taxi off the crowded little street they were on and out onto a broad avenue. Soon they were speeding away from the Old City and out into the Judean hills, whose rocky outcrops sprouted massive housing developments in gleaming white stone.

Magdalen could not begin to understand what she was doing. She was perhaps as baffled as Daoud. Maybe it was a rebellion against her depression, she thought, her sense that this trip was turning out to be another failure. And like a gambler on a losing streak she was throwing the dice foolishly, recklessly, one more time.

At the age of forty she was bitter, lonely, and unloved, and was afraid that she would be for the rest of her life. She had just wound up a two-year affair with an older man, an angry and tempestuous breakup that had left her feeling like a piece of splintered wood drifting in the open ocean.

So she had come here, perhaps to find an anchor for the object of her longing. And instead, what she had found was the same old human uncertainty.

Up, up they went, then curved around a hill, then up again. Behind them the shifting views of the Old City grew more and more spectacular, the golden dome of the Dome of the Rock and the silver dome of Al-Aksa gleaming in the sunlight that now streamed beneath the clouds, emanating from a sinking late-afternoon sun.

In front of them the hills grew less and less urbanized, until it seemed as though they were on the very edge of the city, and beyond them were hills much as they had been when Jesus had walked on them, rock-strewn and dotted with little villages that seemed as ancient and natural as the landscape.

They turned off the main avenue onto a side street and then into a white stone housing complex.

"Here!" Daoud said. "It's in the courtyard. We have to walk."

They got out of the taxi and walked to a flight of stairs leading down to a dirt yard that contained a large, rectangular concrete slab.

"That's it?" Magdalen asked.

"It's behind the concrete," Daoud said in a whisper, unsure why he was whispering. "The authorities don't want anyone to disturb it."

It was nothing, nothing, Magdalen thought. She felt like crying. Another wild goose chase.

She walked down the stairs slowly, hoping to feel something. Daoud remained at the top, leaving her to herself. She knelt at the side of the slab and waited to feel whatever she might feel.

Above her the little rectangle of sky was turning pink. Around her were middle-class apartments, occupied by hundreds of ordinary people coming home from work, making supper, scolding their children, exasperated, at their wit's end, enduring their lives.

And behind that slab was nothing. An empty hole carved into rock that might or might not – probably not – have once held the body of Jesus.

Dearest Jesus! she found herself praying. Help me! I came here because ... I needed You.

She realized as she thought this that until that moment she hadn't been sure why she had come to the Holy Land. But now she knew why she was there, not

just in the Holy Land but kneeling beside a concrete slab in the midst of an Israeli housing development, and for the first time, unaccountably in the gathering gloom, she felt fingers of hope come up over a horizon within her.

She began to weep, whether from happiness or bitterness she didn't know, though it felt like both at once. She took off her dark sunglasses and began to wipe her eyes and cheeks with a tissue she had pulled out of the pocketbook still slung over her left shoulder.

"Ms. Brixton! Ms. Brixton!" Daoud called gently, coming down the stairs and hovering near her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, grateful for his concern. "I need more time," she said through her sobs. "Please."

Daoud turned and went back up the stairs.

Oh, my God! she continued, shaking uncontrollably. Please help me! Please help me! Please

—

She looked up at the now dark little patch of heaven above her, and suddenly she was flooded with love, as though a sun had just risen over the hills in her heart.

Oh, my God! Oh, my God! she found herself repeating, this time out of excitement rather than despair. She heard a voice from within her say, You are mine! You are mine! You are mine! and her sobs became sobs of joy, still choking her, still just as beyond her control, but with a gush of happiness she would remember for the rest of her life.

Later, in the semidarkness, she came back up the stairs to find Daoud stretched out on top of a wall.

"I'm back," she said, coming over to him.

He came out of his sleep. "Ms. Brixton," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. We can go back now."

He jumped down from the wall and they walked silently back to his taxi.

As they curved down the hills in the darkness, down towards the lights of the city below, Magdalen was still shaking from the love that had surged through her. She felt drained, empty, actually, but peaceful, looking towards the future, though with some fear that the love she had discovered might not be sustained.

"Ms. Brixton," Daoud asked her, staring straight ahead at the increasingly crowded road. "Was it the right tomb?"

"Yes, it was," she said, tears again coursing down her cheeks. "Thank you for taking me there. For me it was definitely the right tomb."