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*The Myth of Keji*

# The Myth Of Keji

by Pat Esden

When the Roman legionary arrived, Keji's father sent her away from the campfire and into the tent. But the canvas was not thick and she heard the worst of his message: her father's brother arrested, tried, and condemned to crucifixion. Tomorrow. Outside the walls of Jerusalem.

"For stealing wine?" Her father's voice rose.

"From the garrison." The Roman kept his tone flat. "There is another matter. They have sent a commission, along with payment in advance."

The soft footsteps came across the grass to the tent. Keji slid away from the wall and curled up on her bedroll as if asleep. The tent flap lifted and her mother came in.

Keji held still, breathing slowly. But, even when the entire nomadic camp grew silent she remained awake, staring into the darkness.

Suddenly, the fire outside crackled as if dry wood had been thrown upon it. A hammer struck against anvil and steel. Then, twelve times, there was the hiss of hot iron plunged into water. What was her father doing working this late at night? Why he was still outdoors in the hours when ghosts walked and luck was bad? She shivered and pulled her blankets tight.

#

Clink.

Keji jolted awake. The first streaks of morning light fingered under the walls of the tent. In the rumpled blankets next to her, her mother lay deep in sleep. Her father was not there.

Outside another clink sounded. She scurried from her bedroll and lifted the flap. On the tailboard of their cart, her father was rolling

something up in a lamb's skin, the bundle clanking as he tucked it under his arm. Without a glance at the tent, he strode off in the direction of Jerusalem. She had an idea where he was going. But why was he going alone? Hadn't he always told them that burdens were lighter when carried as a family? She slipped out of the tent and loped after him.

She would follow at a distance, make sure he didn't see her until it was too late for him to send her home. When it came time, she would hold his hand, and he would be glad that she was there.

Keji quickened her pace. In the distance her father's grayed shadow moved across the hilly pastureland, his strides long and swift. She ran to keep him in sight and by the time he passed the olive groves and reached the city wall, her heart pounded in her ears.

Bending over, she paused to catch her breath. Ahead the road bustled with pilgrims and shepherds. Her father joined the flow, a jostling speck fading through the city's gate. As he vanished, Keji's barely-settled heart began to race again. She hurried down the hill, elbowed her way into the throng, and went under the archway and into Jerusalem. Entering the city felt like walking into a narrow valley filled with shadows, echoes and stenches. The buildings hemmed her in. People shoved. Vendors shouted. Market stalls cramped the street. Lambs screamed. Oxen bellowed. The smell of blood and entrails stole her breath.

Keji scanned the street for her father. Where was he? She needed something to stand on so she could see above the crowd. Beside her was a stall filled with crates of chickens. She stepped into it and glanced around.

Skirts rustled behind her. She turned. A

pain stung her cheek. "Steal from me, thieving piss-rat, and I'll kill you." The woman drew back her arm to slap again.

Keji ducked under the woman's arm, close enough to smell sweat and see the woman's coin purse. If she had wanted to, she could have snagged the purse. But today, she was not here for coin.

With the woman's curses still ringing in her ears, Keji crisscrossed the market. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed her father disappearing into an alleyway and dashed after him.

Narrow and dark, the slippery alley reeked of urine. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness and by the time they did she found herself coming out into the bright light of a wide street.

She let out her breath, this street she recognized. Her mother had brought her here last week, showed her where the temple was, where to sit and how to catch the attention of the pilgrims by seeding her beggar's plate with a coin or two.

Today, however, there was no room along the street or up on the square for even the smallest of beggars to sit. She had never seen such a mob. And everyone pushed in the same direction--the direction she was sure her father had gone, toward the far side of the city, the other gate and the hillock beyond. To the place her mother had called the Hill of Skulls. Her stomach tensed and her mind swirled as she thought about crucifixion. Last night when the Roman legionary had come to their camp, she had heard only snatches of the conversation. It had never occurred to her that her uncle's crime had been so great that this many people would come to see him die. Images of bodies she had seen on posts outside the walls of other cities flooded her mind. She could hear the flies, taste the odor of rotted flesh, but she could not recall that anyone had mentioned what those people's crimes had been. She bit her lip, swallowing

back a raw fear. Was no one safe?

Pushing her way into the mob, she let them sweep her up the street: horses, donkeys, priests and prostitutes, a man touching her hair. "Want to earn a coin?" She twisted away from him. Women laughed. How could they drink and laugh? The perfume of myrrh and aloe. Sweet-smelling incense. Keji passed through the archway and beyond the wall, up the hill. When the crowd stopped, she wove between their bodies until she stood with nothing between her and the Roman soldiers that held back the crowd. Only two cart lengths away, up on the flat top of the hillock, three crosses lay propped on mounds of sand, at an angle that elevated the criminal's heads. Despite the dizzying heat, she felt chilled and longed for the warmth of her father's hand.

That was when she spotted him. Her father stood beyond the line of Roman soldiers, by the farthest cross, looking down at her uncle. Her uncle lay on his back, his arms bound to the cross member, his legs falling to one side. Whip marks striped his chest. Even at this distance she could detect the sourness of his sweat, see his eyes--dead drunk. Her father often said he was a stupid thief, stupid when he was drinking. Who steals wine from a Roman garrison when it is free for the asking in your brother's tent?

She clenched her jaw. People from the Dom tribe, like her uncle, like her, needed to stay invisible, to blend in. If only her uncle had . . . and now the Romans knew her father's name and where they camped. After a moment her uncle's lips began to move, but she could not hear him over the din of the crowd. She had to get closer. Skirting the edge of the crowd, she crept past a soldier and knelt by a pile of stones.

Her uncle's voice was a ragged wheeze, "I'm sorry, brother, for what they have made you do. It's not right."

Her father crouched and set his bundle on the ground. "They are the sharpest things

I've ever forged." His voice faltered, dark lines of sweat streaked his tunic. The spikes clanked as he unrolled them from the lambskin.

Keji's body went numb, her eyes unable to turn away from the glint of the spikes. She wished she had never come. She wanted to run. She couldn't move.

The broad shadow of a Roman soldier darkened her father. "Who better to make the nails for a thief than a filthy Dom-smith? Maybe you should hammer them as well," the Roman said loud enough for everyone to hear.

A cheer rose from the crowd.

Her father's shoulders tightened. "I'd die before I'd crucify . . ."

Pushing her father aside, the Roman picked up a spike and the hammer. Before Keji could look away, the hammer rang out, echoing like a bell, like a thunder clap. Her uncle's arm spasmed. She squeezed her eyes shut. Another clang. A grinding crunch. A moan. Her uncle's rasping voice.

"You're right brother, sharp as knives."

Keji opened her eyes.

Her uncle's head lolled to one side, his eyes open, staring. Her father dropped to his knees and bent over, his head touching the ground, his shoulders heaving.

The Roman turned toward the mob, his teeth showing as he grinned. The mob hissed at him and threw stones.

Keji trembled as a cold realization hit her. She followed the eyes of the crowd--they were not here to see her uncle. He was like seed coin in a beggar's plate; something designed by the Romans to garner the mob's attention before the real show began. In truth, it was the man lashed to the middle cross that had drawn the mob.

She studied him: his eyes focused on the sky, his lips moving as if in prayer. He turned his face toward her—

And a blaze of light consumed her. Then, the two of them stood on a hillock above a green pasture watching her mother dance in the shade of an olive tree while her father slept, and her uncle told stories to a crowd of children.

Keji looked away, but she could still feel the warmth of the light and the serenity of the place he had shown her. A raw ache filled her chest—she was sure that he was guilty of nothing.

Suddenly she was running, sidestepping the soldier. "Keji!" Her father struggled to rise from his knees.

A soldier lunged, his fingers snatched her arm. She twisted free and was on the ground, grabbing the spikes. Her hands were too small, the spikes heavy. How many did she have? Not all of them. She was on her feet. She bolted, in front of the crosses. The crowd laughed. A Roman cursed. She sprinted into the crowd. They closed in, then fanned out. Behind her, heavy footfalls sounded. Her lungs burned. Her sides ached . . .

She moved fast, past a fortune-teller, baskets of dates, smoke, roasting meat, under the archway into Jerusalem. An alley, a deserted street, a wall—

"Got you." A man snagged her tunic and spun her around. The legionary was a large man, almost as big as her father. His face flushed and his forehead shone with sweat. Holding the spikes behind her, Keji jerked free from him and backed against the wall.

His brows drew together as he studied her.

Behind her back, Keji worked her hands, pushing the spikes into the cracked mortar of the wall--three of them were all she had managed to take.

The legionary held out his hand, his palms smooth, his destiny line short. "The nails."



She recognized his voice. He was the legionary that had come to their camp last night. And now that she saw his face she remembered him from other visits, in other places. Many times he had come, and always he had ridden the same gelding: a sweet animal, gentled by a man capable of love. As her mother had taught her, Keji widened her

eyes: the sad beggar's look. "I don't have them."

His face didn't soften. "I know that man was your uncle, that your father was forced to smith the nails--didn't you learn anything from that? Thievery . . ." One of his hands waved up toward the crosses on the hill.

"It is your crime as well." His other hand crushed her shoulder. "Give me the nails. I'll say you dropped them."

Her legs trembled. "I don't have them." She hesitated and looked into his eyes. "I swallowed them."

He exhaled in a huff and yanked her forward. "That's impossible."

She brought her hands out from behind her back and put them on her stomach. "They were not so large and the pain is no worse than hunger."

She winced.

He let go of her.

"Stupid girl." His face paled, and then he glared at her. "Stay here. If you're telling the truth this is a better place to die than up there. If you're lying . . ."

She dropped to her knees, buried her face in her hands and dry heaved.

The legionary's steps echoed against the cobbles and once they had faded, she got onto all fours. With a sharp rock she scratched a symbol at the base of the wall. No Roman would understand the markings, but if her father saw the marks they would tell him she had gone back to camp. Then, after glancing at the spikes, she got to her feet and took off running.

##

The next morning, Keji, her family, her father's anvil and iron and all her tribe--their tents and horses, every song, every word, every shadow, each bright remnant--was gone from Jerusalem. They crossed the hills, and in two days' time they blended in with another tribe: wagons heavy with bears, tents and dogs--wandering from India toward Rome.

At twilight, as the moon rose and the sparks of the campfire flew into the darkness, with the scent of roasting scallions and frying pork, her father asked Keji to tell her story to the gathered tribes. And she did, word for word. But when she came to the

part about the man on the cross next to her uncle, she hesitated. How could she explain what she had seen when his eyes met hers? How it felt? How the feeling still burned inside of her, hot and restless like an ember waiting to be fanned to life? Keji stared into the campfire, her voice ghosting over the crackle of the flames.

"He looked at me and a blazing light consumed me, inside and without as well. An instant later, he and I stood on a hillock overlooking a green pasture--a wonderful, horrible place.

"Wonderful because it was all things good, horrible because the man who could have shown me the road to that place is dead, crucified." Her chest tightened with an ache so powerful she couldn't speak.

A low wind stirred the fire, smoke swirling toward the town they had camped outside of. From the darkness came the splash of sheep crossing a nearby stream. Keji looked at the faces around the fire, black eyes reflecting flame. One of the elders rose to his feet and glared at Keji's father. "I have sympathy for your family: for what the Roman's forced you to do and for your brother's death. But, encouraging a child to believe in something that was nothing more than a mirage brought on by too much heat and sun, is shameful."

Keji's hands fisted. "It was real! I smelled the olives and the moist grass. I heard my uncle telling stories and the rhythm of my father's breath while he slept. Felt the quiver of the earth as my mother danced upon it!"

Her father crouched beside her, his eyes challenging the elder. "My daughter tells the truth. The light bathed me as well. It brought me to my knees. I saw the place she speaks of. It is real, offered to us by a man, a savior, and then taken away, as was my brother, by the spikes I forged."

Keji embraced her father and they held each other. The flash of firelight. The drone

of the tribe beyond the warmth of their arms.

"Hush," her father whispered. "Go to the tent. I'll finish your story."

Keji sat back. Lack of sleep lined her father's eyes. "No, I need to tell it." She took a breath, and then told about stealing the spikes and when she came to the part about how she outwitted the legionary, everyone laughed. Keji had no desire to laugh. As soon as the questions turned from her to her father, she stole away to her family's tent and lay on her bedroll, listening to the murmurs of the tribes as she tried to fall asleep. But even when the entire camp grew silent she remained awake, staring into the darkness, her mind flooded with the memory of the green pasture. In the hushed darkness of the tent that green place felt very close. She could feel it inside of her. But how could that be? Then again, why not, the clang of the hammer hitting a spike and her uncle's moans lived inside of her. If only he hadn't stolen that wine—

In a chill of sudden realization, the words the legionary had spoken returned to Keji. It is your crime as well. Like her uncle, she too was a thief, even if at the time stealing the spikes had seemed like the right thing to do. The clang of hammer and spike rang through her body. Keji couldn't swallow. She couldn't breathe. She bolted from her blanket roll and hurried from the tent—into the moonlight, stumbling through the dark pasture land, gasping for breath.

The bank of the stream was slick. She waded in, splashing water on her face and arms. Perhaps the coolness would ease her fevered mind. Keji knelt, the water encircling her. She closed her eyes, trying to rid herself of the thoughts. If only she knew where that green pasture was, her family could go there, ease all their burdens. She bowed her head. Then, though her eyes remained shut, a blazing light vanquished the night's darkness.

On her shoulder, she felt a touch of a

hand and a hand cupped her chin, raising her face. "Open your eyes; the way to the green pasture is before you," a soft voice said.

In front of her, standing in the stream, was the man who had been crucified with her uncle. He reached out and helped her to her feet. As she had known that the green pasture was not a mirage, she knew now that this man was not a ghost. She let her eyes meet his—

And they stood in the green pasture along with her family and her tribe and many others as well. He held her hand. Her heart slowed. And a feeling of goodness and serenity filled her. His voice was the light. "The road to here is not easy. On either side there are traps to lure you from righteousness. Look neither left nor right. The way is before you. You are forgiven. Now go and sin no more," he said.

And as quickly as it had come, the light vanished and she stood alone in the stream, the cool water rippling around her legs. She did not want to move. She wanted to feel like this forever: totally at peace, utterly clean. For a long moment she could hardly breathe, and then her heart quickened and began to soar with the desire to tell everyone what had happened. She waded out of the stream and ran back toward camp. But she slowed when she saw her mother waiting, hands folded across her chest.

"A wonderful thing has happened. I saw the man who was crucified in Jerusalem at the river." She spoke before Mother could stop her.

Mother's eyes narrowed. "Watching your uncle crucified has taken your wits, as it did to your father. It's dangerous to be out alone this time of night. And I have no need to hear a tale about an imaginary ghost."

"Not a ghost: a man, risen from the grave."

Mother pointed to the tent. "Inside, now. Sleep will free you of this delusion."

"I don't wish to be free of him!"



“Hush, do you wish to wake your father when he hasn’t slept in days?”

Keji bit her tongue. She went into the tent and curled up on her bedroll. She’d wait for Father to awake.

#

“Keji,” her mother’s voice brought her from her sleep. Gray light filled the tent. “I didn’t realize you were still asleep. Hurry. The other children are almost ready to leave.”

Half awake, Keji struggled to separate sleep from the reality of what had happened at the stream. She had to make her mother believe her. “I wasn’t lying,” she said.

Mother’s jaw tensed as she set a tunic and a beggar’s plate beside Keji’s bedroll.

A sour taste rose from Keji’s stomach. “I don’t want to. I can’t beg! He said I was forgiven. Thieving from people--”

Mother’s hands snapped to her hips. “Enough of this. I will not tolerate you using your fantasy as an excuse for not doing your share. I will not stand for you insulting our tribe’s ways. There is a difference between thievery and cleverness. When a woman drops coins in your plate because you look sad and poor, who is smarter? Who is hurt? She thinks she has done a good deed. No one is harmed. When a merchant leaves a basket of dates or a purse unattended we do him a favor—teach him vigilance before a thief steals all his dates or coins.”

Mother wrapped her arms around Keji, kissing her hair. “Your father’s come back to his senses. Now forget Jerusalem. Be my good girl again. Take your plate and join the other children.” Mother trembled as she

clutched Keji tight, then she released her and hurried from the tent. Keji pulled on her tunic. No one, not even Mother, could convince her that she had imagined the risen man and the green pasture. He had said she was forgiven and at the time she thought he had meant forgiven for more than just stealing the Roman’s spikes. She had felt cleansed. But her mother had never lied to her. Her mother loved her. Maybe she had misunderstood what the man meant about wrong deeds and forgiveness. It didn’t feel like she had, but maybe . . .

Grabbing the beggar’s plate, Keji went outside. The other children were at the burnt-out campfire dirtying themselves with ashes, making sure they looked neglected.

On the edge of the road, her father talked to a pair of Romans while her mother unrolled bundles of knives for them to look at. Until this moment, it hadn’t occurred to Keji that without her uncle’s help, Mother now would have to stay in camp to help Father instead of taking the children into town.

Keji set her beggar’s plate on the ground and scooped up a handful of ash. Her stomach churned. She rubbed the ash the length of both arms, then on her face. Though cool, the ash prickled and heated as it touched her skin. She bent to pick up her beggar’s plate. But as her fingers touched the hard clay, she heard the dull clink of nonexistent seed coins and she saw other places, other times, other beggars she had sat beside: a man with no legs, a child whose eyes had been replaced by lash marks—and the children of her tribe, healthy beneath their rags.



She pulled her fingers back from the plate and as she did a certain thought filled her: the beggar's plate was not of the same earth as the green pasture, nor was it part of the road that led there. For a moment, Keji stood motionless, and then she knew what she had to do. She brought her bare heel down on the plate. With a loud crack it shattered.

Her mother's eyes went to the broken

plate, so did those of the Romans, her father, all the children. But their eyes did not linger there; they widened and rose, staring at Keji's arms and face. Keji felt flushed. Her skin itched. She looked at her arms to see why everyone stared at them. Where the ash had dirtied her skin, welts erupted, raw and oozing as raised as whip marks. And as they spread, a burning pain enveloped her entire body.

She ran for the stream. Behind her footfalls echoed. The hardness of the earth. Her skin burning. The coolness as she fell to her knees in the water, then went under it.

The man had not said the road to the green pasture would be easy. No matter what her mother said, the falseness of the ash was not right. She held her breath, staying under until her lungs could wait no longer. Then, she rose from the water, her arms and face clean and cool. No trace of blister or even redness.

He had said the way was before her.

In front of her a crowd gathered: shepherds, Romans, other travelers, members of other tribes and her tribe.

The rising sun brushed against her shoulders. She waded through the water toward them.

They splashed into the stream, encircling her. Hands touching her arms. Fingers brushing her face. Frenzied murmurs. Her father pushed out from the crowd. He embraced Keji, his cheek damp against hers. He released her and faced the crowd. "Quiet. Let her speak!"

Keji started to take a deep breath, but it caught in her throat. Where was Mother? She glanced through the crowd, then beyond.

Mother stood on the top of the stream bank, her hands limp at her sides. Their eyes met.

Keji smiled and beckoned for Mother to

join them.

Her mother turned her back, and walked away.

Emptiness filled Keji. Her legs trembled.

Father's hand gripped hers. "Let her be," he whispered. And the crowd hushed.

Keji's eyes went from the empty stream bank to the people gathered in front of her. She swallowed back the sadness and let words rise up from the green place inside of her. "Do you think you have seen a miracle?" She held out her arms as evidence. "What your eyes see is real, but this is only the surface. Let me tell you a story about twelve spikes, about my uncle and the man I saw crucified in Jerusalem and about a road to a place that is green and wonderful. Let me tell you about wrong deeds and forgiveness . . ."

# #

Over the years, in market places that reminded Keji of Jerusalem, in front of great temples, in wagons and on ships, when she traveled alone or with those of her tribe, Keji heard her own story, heard it transformed into song and myth, twisted and convoluted depending on the desires of the storyteller. But when she told the story, it was always the same: about a girl who would have stolen all the spikes if her hands had been large enough, about a green pasture and of a crucified man who forgave her for her crimes.