

Daughters of the Sun
(Excerpted)
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I began this project unknowingly over three years ago during my second semester as an undergraduate student in my Western Classics seminar. While studying Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, our professor asked the class, "Well, what if God had had a daughter?" Though we did not stay long on this topic, the question was burned in my brain: What if God *had* had a daughter? What would she sound like? Look like? And, most importantly, what would her story be?

Her name is Alleluia, but she prefers Álle. She lives in our world, among us but not of us, part divine, part mortal and all alone. Her story begins the way many women's stories begin, with the words, You do not know me. She has been written out of the story, erased from the Gospels with every flick of the men's pens. In one night—a Saturday into Sunday morning, sitting in an attic apartment across from a church—she will rewrite the Gospels and reinsert herself into the narrative. Her story, called *Daughters of the Sun*, is what shall set her free.

With a project of this magnitude, research is critical. Books such as Stephen Mitchell's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* and Reza Aslan's *Zealot* as well as novels including Jose Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, David Maine's *Fallen* and Colm Toibin's *The Testament of Mary* have been influential for both content and framing techniques. Mitchell and Aslan focus on the historical Jesus—Jesus of Nazareth—not Jesus the Christ, as Aslan writes. Mitchell, a Yale University graduate, scholar and anthropologist, translates the gospels, writing that, "We know so little about [Jesus's] life. A very few facts, and no more. He was baptized by John the Baptist. He taught. He healed. He was crucified by the Romans" (17). This allows me to insert Alleluia almost anywhere into the known narrative. Aslan delves deep into the story of

Jesus of Nazareth, not Jesus the Christ. He uses known historical facts and the political turmoil of the time to create not just a character, but a portrait of a man.

Along the way, I have read a number of novels that portray Jesus in a light which we are not used to, or from a voice we have not heard. Colm Toibin's *Testament of Mary* is a slim book of beautiful prose. He retells the story from Mary's perspective after the crucifixion, when Mary is alone and angry. Jose Saramago's much longer *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* is written in Saramago's signature style: long prose paragraphs with nary a comma or period in sight, but there is a magical quality to his words that brings Jesus alive. Most recently, I gave myself a slight break and journeyed back to Jesus's time with his best friend, Biff, in Christopher Moore's delightfully quirky novel, *Lamb*. From bringing lizards back to life at the well to the true meaning behind why Jews eat Chinese food for Christmas dinner, Moore's spin on the traditional tale is both charming and blasphemous.

Though this is the conclusion, it is not the end of the story. There are still tens of thousands of words to be written by Alleluia and thousands more to be read by me. Her story is told in one night, but has taken me hundreds to tell. She will not be silenced any longer. She has found her voice as I have found mine. This is her-story, and I am but the lowly scribe.

And now, without further ado, I will stop and let Álle take over:

You have never heard of me before. You have never heard of me, but my name has come out of your mouth thousands of times. You have never heard of me because they did not tell you.

He created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Yes, that is true. But fast forward from the Old to the New and the Half-Truths begin. Sure the stories are semi-accurate—they couldn't have gotten everything wrong. They just omitted one crucial piece of the puzzle: Me. I am not the Chosen One, but the Forgotten One, the One Pushed Aside. Typical: the woman standing in the shadow of the man's light. And I do mean literal light. He glowed. But don't get me wrong. I loved him—love him. He is my brother after all. Yes, I love him, but I don't like him all that much. He left me here with the humans. These stupid mortals! That is the second coming: coming to get me.

Oh don't worry. I've been waiting over two thousand years. I have time to tell you one story.

I am a woman like any other you would pass on the street. I have two eyes, a nose, a mouth, two arms and two legs, like you. I most certainly do not glow. And yes (because I know you are wondering) I even have bad hair days. See, what'd I tell you? The main difference between you and me is that I know. I know everything. Well, everything in the past that is. Unfortunately I can't see into the future. I know because I was there. Oh yes. Empires, kings, queens, tyrants, wars, ideas, and (some) progress.

I hear the bells tolling through the open window. It is nearly Sunday. I get a weekly reminder about what a disappointment I am, about how not only have I screwed

up my life, but the life of every human who has lived, is living and will ever live. What am I talking about? Well, to answer that, we must go back, all the way, to the beginning.

The clock chimes above my head. I must get this out. Tonight is the night, I can feel it in my very old bones. “Why?” you ask. It has been floating around in my brain for many years (many, many years). And when the sun pushes itself above the horizon tomorrow—Well I won’t give away the ending. These words, my words, are all that matter now, so please be patient. It will be clear in time.

Where does the story begin? My story begins in a barn. Yes, the barn. The two weary travelers, mostly sure of what the night will bring yet still scared, take the only shelter available. Ten fingers, ten toes, they hope. Two horses stand in the stalls, their onyx eyes watchful and their velvet bodies perfuming the air with their earthy scent. One has a star on her forehead. She will bring luck. The other has a line of white from her ears to the broad tip of her nose. She will bring courage. Two cats mew for attention. One winds his body around the man’s legs. The man kicks at him and the woman scolds, “Joseph!” Then the pains grab her underneath her breasts and she doubles over. Nothing exists for a minute except what is inside her and trying to get out. She is exhausted but finds strength in breath. As the pains die, she lets Joseph settle her on a bed of straw. Her lower back aches. The weight in her womb shifted suddenly the other day when they were traveling and she thought she was going to give birth in the middle of the road. Something is not right. She has known this for a while. It is a feeling in her gut, oily and dark. Tonight, she knows, will reveal the truth.

“Water,” she asks. Joseph goes to her mule standing in the middle of the unfamiliar barn. The mule is tired. He had to carry the woman on his back the whole way and she was not light. His back aches too.

Joseph takes the spoon and looks around. She nods at the water trough in the corner. It is not good enough, but it is all she has. The water slides into her stomach, cool but stale, and washes away the feeling. She knows it will return. She has lived long enough to know that the past repeats in the present.

She looks up and, through the slats on the roof, can see two stars. Not one, but two. The pains return and hold her belly in their unforgiving fists. Why? The thought occurs in a moment of weakness. Why must it hurt this much? She is not asking Him, but Her, the first, the original. The one from whom all pain began. Then the pains pass. She is sweating and panting. One of the barn cats purrs in her ear while the other hides in the shadows. She closes her eyes. Sleep is close, but the pains are closer.

“Oh God,” she mumbles before cringing. She should not be saying His name like that, but He is not the one in this pain. “Joseph. I feel something.” She licks her cracked lips. It is too much. She wants to bury herself under the hay. Why, she asks again, why does it have to be this? “Low, beneath my stomach.” Her cheeks flame. He is my husband. He is a man. He is all I have.

“Let me see,” Joseph says. He has never looked down there. The Virgin Mother is left with no choice but to part her legs. He pauses, his eyes widening in—horror?

“What?” she demands. “Is something wrong?” Please, do not let anything be wrong with him. I will do anything. Let him be okay.

Joseph shakes his head. “No, I—” He pauses and she clenches a handful of hay. “I can see his head.”

Releasing the hay, she exhales and with that breath, her body tells her to push. It is an instinct, a guiding from the mothers who have gone before her, her own mother whispering in her ear: Do not forget to breathe, my daughter. This time there is no man, angel or otherwise, guiding her, coaching her, promising her things that are not and will never be. One horse shakes her mane while the other whinnies. With courage and luck, she pushes.

“Yes, yes, that is it.” Joseph’s eyes are sparkling. She thinks she can see the baby’s head reflected in their brown depths. She closes her eyes and tells him, You will be well. When the pains stop, she rests. One of the cats bats a piece of hay with his paw. She reaches for the feline.

“One more,” Joseph says, as if he knows anything about what is happening. “One more, Mary. Two breaths and you shall be done.”

She bears down, breathes, sends every ounce of energy to the horse’s star and pushes.

“Almost there,” Joseph’s words fill her ears and she pushes them out too. She does not need them. Does she need him? Well, if nothing else, he is nice to have. She does not favor being alone. Bad memories. A scream flies from her mouth, raw and unforgiving. It is not the pains, but the face, her face: the Dark One.

Then, a release, wet and slippery and unexpected. Joseph is shouting and smiling. It is over. And it has just begun.

“Jesus,” she exhales, her body falling limp into the hay. She expected to feel empty, deflated, but there is not time for that because there is more. “Joseph.” He does not hear her. Her voice is weak. She pulls everything she has left inside and shouts, “Joseph!”

He looks down at her as the baby starts crying.

“I think,” she begins as the pains start. She inhales and says with the breath, “There is another one. Another baby.”

Joseph is stunned. She knows she has about half a minute before the pains set in, for she can feel them building.

“Find something,” she pants as sweat slides down the crescent of her face and drops into her already soaked tunic, “to put him in.”

“One,” Joseph says, confusion smeared on his face. “You said there was to be one.”

He is not the one in pain. He plays no part in this. It is that voice, the one that comes to her in the darkest moments of the night, the moments when demon hands wrap around her throat, when their claws puncture her skin and she bleeds for her sins. It is the voice that guides her to do the bad things her soul craves. It is the voice she wishes she could listen to more. It is the one that gives her more courage than any god could. It is the voice of another. It is her voice.

Now, though, she has no time. She is being demanded of by something—someone—else. “Please Joseph,” she pleads as the pains begin to take over. Her body tenses and concentrates itself, pulls itself into her core. She squeezes her eyes shut but hears him rustling around. There is nothing but the pains. She forgot their

unforgiving ferocity the moment the boy slid out of her body, but they have come back, harder than before. They slide out from her stomach, tendrils coil around her muscles and joints, and squeeze. Her head pounds, her arms and legs ache, and her womb has endured so much pain, it is numb.

She feels heat and opens one eye to find Joseph kneeling between her knees. He looks perplexed, but murmurs encouraging words. “You are doing well, Mary. Yes, I can see his head.” His eyes light up as if this were the first time and not the second in as many minutes.

“Oh!” she screams, bearing down into the hay, grunting, panting, sweating and straining. “Get it out of me!”

Joseph nods like he knows exactly how to do this. She leans back as the pains subside. “Almost there. Next one and you will be done. I am proud of you.” He smiles and reaches for her hand. They have traveled so far together, all to reach this one place for this one event. Well, two events. But what about what happens next? That angel never said anything about after, how they will care for two babies. She looks over and sees the panic on Joseph’s face. He is thinking the same, perhaps even worse.

She inhales and squints as the pains rise from deep in her belly, the dark place of all pain, male and female. She feels numb between her legs and does not realize it is over until Joseph cradles the baby. She falls back, her entire body releasing. A warm, wet, sticky lump on her chest. She fumbles around until her breast is exposed. The child latches on as Joseph looks down at the slimy mess in the hay under her feet and begins sucking. She hurts, but it is nothing compared to the pains before.

He looks with a quick glance to see that her breast is almost fully covered and says, "It is a girl."

Mary whispers, "Alleluia." Two: horses, cats, stars and babies. Twins: boy and girl. History repeating itself.

Joseph stands dumbfounded. "But, you said one. The Son of God."

"This is my fault?" Mary asks as the girl ate first. "He said one baby."

"Then why are there two?"

Mary exhales. She has no energy to deal with his panic. The babies are more important. She may be only sixteen, but she is a mother. She brought these babies into the world, not him. That is something he will never be able to do. "I do not know, Joseph. Maybe something got mixed up from Heaven down. Maybe the angels are having a laugh at our expenses. Whatever the reason, here they are. The children of God. Our children. Bring me the boy. He needs to drink." She shifts the girl to make room for the boy and within moments both are suckling. Mary strokes the girl's head with her index finger. The skin is soft and has a delicate perfume. She inhales.

"She needs a name," Joseph says.

"She has one." Mary leans down and whispers into the girl's ear, "Alleluia."

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