

Preface

The Misfit Messiah begins where Steal Away ended after a botched welcoming celebration for the “Second Coming” of Christ. But instead of welcoming the anticipated Guest, all hell broke out in the little southern town of Lowman, thanks to members of the KKK and sympathetic law enforcement. It was October 6, 1968.

Before that, it seems, Lowman was a sleepy little town where nothing ever changed. And like all small towns, it was a world unto itself filled with a cast of characters, characters known to each other and expected to perform according to their understood roles. Of course, that did not always happen, and whenever one character should get out of line, out of character, they were ostracized in the most convivial way. Usually. Gossiped about, avoided, backstabbed, but always greeted with charm school congeniality.

But times were changing, and to counteract, or perhaps to take advantage of the perceived crumbling of social norms, politicians and clergy stepped in to clean up - ostensibly for the good of the people, but if there was power and money to be had - God be praised.

Yet, miraculously, within this Bible-thumping theocracy lived a small group of friends thriving in spite of the oppressive world around them. Misfits in the eyes of the general population. Then, the biggest misfit of all showed up.

Chapter 1

Keturah's Curio Shop Jesus woke in a fetal position, his head throbbing. He rubbed his eyes, then struggled to open them. The thing he saw for the first time ever was darkness. He strained to stretch his stiff limbs, stubbing a toe into a heavy chunk of wood. His first inhalation reeked of stale mustiness. His first thought was more like a feeling, a wordless

sense of abandonment. Otherwise, his mind was a blank page. No “me” or “here,” “there,” or “why.”

Feeling slowly crept through his body. His head pounded; his feet and palms itched; his side ached. Jesus trembled as he struggled to stand. A large furry rodent scrambled in the dark across his sandaled feet. He grasped for something to steady himself and sent a shelf crashing.

A sliver of light slicing through the crack in a door caught his attention. He stumbled toward it, dizzy, and stared through the narrow gap; the bright light stung his eyes. His hands fumbled with the door, searching for a way to escape the darkness. Finally, the door creaked open.

The outer room was bathed in light through two large pane glass windows at the front of the building. The groggy savior walked cautiously toward the light, then froze. Just outside the windows on the street, people swarmed, some fighting, some hunkering down in groups. Figures in white robes and pointed hats scurried away while a group of pale-skin men dragged away two other pale-skin men in uniforms screaming and flailing about. There were dark-skin creatures, too, and they were crying and holding each other. Jesus inched forward, his body trembling. A new feeling overtook him: fear. Up to now, his only experience of the world had been with eyes shut tight: the murmurs of prayers and pleadings of faithful Catholics - all meaningless to him - and the smell of incense and candle smoke. He stepped back cautiously, leaned against a display counter, and watched transfixed from the safety of this darkened space cluttered with shelves and shelves of dusty bric-a-brac.

A flick on his hand startled him. There, atop the smudged glass showcase, a rat sat staring at him. Jesus sighed. He felt comforted by the little creature, another new feeling for the newly-awakened savior. He smiled, then raised his hand to stroke the creature; it scuttled off. The Lord turned his attention back to the activity on the street outside the window.

Once the people with light skin left the scene, the dark-skin people began to sing and dance. Jesus relaxed, rocking back and forth in his sandals. The joy was contagious. Little did he know that this ecstatic group just outside the window, dressed in choir robes and their Sunday best, were singing about him.

Nor did he know that just moments before, before he was awakened, while he still hung silently from a gigantic wooden cross in the storage room of Keturah's Curio Shop, a loud sonic boom had shaken the small southern town of Lowman, dislodging the crucifix from its moorings. Jesus had no way of knowing this or that the event that had just ended had been meant as a welcoming party for his arrival, for the Second Coming, for the Rapture. How could he? At this point in time, he had no idea who he was or that two and a half billion of Earth's population hailed him as the savior of the world. And now the savior of the world was hungry.

Hunger, like all his feelings since waking in the storage room, was a novel sensation. Instinctively, he began to search for something to eat. He scanned the shop not knowing exactly what he was looking for. The dusty shelves were crammed with old coins, abused musical instruments, Native American jewelry, shrunken heads, a basket of rabbit's feet, carved wooden animals, African masks, a child's slate chalkboard wiped clean, a small book section in the back of the book store, but no food.

A cheerful, if a bit ratty, doll caught his eye. Its hair was pulled back in two blond ponytails atop a vinyl body with a moveable head and limbs. Jesus picked it up. A label that made no sense to the son of God identified her as Chatty Cathy. As he picked it up, a plastic ring hanging from Cathy's back brushed the lord's finger. He turned her over and found it attached by a string to the doll's back. Jesus considered, then pulled the string. "I love you," she said. Startled, he dropped the doll. She lay silent on the dusty floor. Jesus squatted down and picked CC up, and after examining her again, he pulled the string a second time. "Tell me a story," she demanded. At this point, Jesus had no story to tell

if he had understood what the pale-skin garrulous depiction of a small humanoid said. Even so, she became an instant companion, a distraction from the silence in the curio shop. But right now, his stomach was growling; he carried the doll with him and continued to search the shop for nourishment.

Jesus wandered back to the storage room. Now, with the door wide open, he could better see where he had found himself a short while ago. His large wooden cross lay on the floor surrounded by boxes brimming with miscellaneous objects and books but no food. Over in the corner of the room, a desk. He carefully edged over and examined the desk cluttered with papers, a black book labeled "The Torah," and a miniature menorah.

Obviously, the owner of the shop was Jewish, as was Jesus, but that would not have meant anything to him in his current lack of memory.

One might ask why a Jewish woman, Keturah Pincus, had had a life-size crucifix in her shop. Well, for the same reason she had African and Native American artifacts: to sell. And where better to sell a life-size Jesus but in the religious deep South, she had thought. But being Jewish and not all that familiar with the differences in religious practices between Catholic and non-Catholic persuasions, Ms. Pincus had been unaware that crucifixes were not a part of evangelical practices, and in the tiny town of Lowman, there were no Catholics and plenty of evangelicals. The crucifix had only gathered dust and took up space in her already crowded shop - hence its home in the storage room in the back of the store.

Jesus opened the top drawer of the desk and found it laden with pencils and paper clips. The drawer below held sheets of virgin paper. But on opening the bottom drawer, Jesus found one package of yellow tubular objects filled with a white cream and wrapped in see-through paper; "Twinkies" shouted the package in bold red letters. "Food?" wondered Jesus, his first real thought, though the word itself did not actually occur

to him. He lifted the package and fought the cellophane open. Its sweetness wafted up, recalling a vague recollection, an olfactory memory he couldn't place, not ever having actually seen the burning of incense. The ravenous savior opened his mouth for the first time and took a bite of the confection. His tongue, new to the task, relayed messages to his brain that had nothing in its memory for comparison. He moved his jaws awkwardly then, after a pause, swallowed with difficulty. It was a bit overwhelming. Jesus set the other half down and wiped his mouth with his hand, and waited for the sugar rush to subside.

Meanwhile, the little rat showed up on the desktop as if answering a dinner bell. It gazed up at the Lord, filling him with that warm feeling again. Jesus reached for the Twinkie to share with his new friend, and when he did, it was whole, as if he had never bitten into it. He pinched a bit off and placed it in front of the rat. The brown furry creature edged forward and, sitting up on its back legs, devoured the crumb. The Son of God then pinched another crumb and held it in front of his little friend. The rat eased forward, then bit into the confection, nipping Jesus' finger. Unflustered, the Prince of Peace merely touched his bleeding finger with his other hand, and the bleeding stopped. "Please brush my hair," he said to the rat, echoing his doll friend. After a few more bites of the snack cake, Jesus had had enough.

He replaced the Twinkie in the drawer and paced around the store, aimlessly handling the oddities in the curio shop, his body shaking from the sugar. After some time, his heart began to slow; he began to calm. The light was dimming outside. The street, for the most part, was empty. Jesus found a woman's wool coat hanging on a hook near the front of the store and placed it behind a display of rocks and crystals, then curled up there on the floor and, for the first time, dreamed.

He stood on a cliff high on a mountaintop, the wind at his back, naked, alone. Then, behind him, shouting, an angry throng rushed toward him. Some wore suits, some uniforms, and a few were robed in white with pointed hats like those he had seen the first day. Some carried sticks,

some guns, and some carried books. The mob picked up their pace, screaming as they drew near. Jesus faced them and raised his hands, but to no avail. Now he saw their blood-red eyes. With no other options, he leaped backward, falling, falling.

He woke the next morning dazed and afraid.

Men were out in the street dismantling the stage that on the day before had been the scene of jubilation, violence, and bedlam. Jesus cowered, still reeling from his nightmare. Just then, a light-skin man in a uniform passed on the sidewalk just outside the front windows. Jesus held his breath. Then when the man had passed, he retreated to the little office for a breakfast of replicating Twinkies. His rat friend joined in.

The rat and Chatty Cathy were his only company in the curio shop, and after a while, the doll quit speaking. Keturah Pincus had closed her business and fled the growing antisemitism in the town to stay with her sister up north, but Jesus felt safe in the shop. He watched the comings and goings of people on the street for weeks, secure in his hideaway, living off Twinkies; his hair and beard grew longer, his tummy fatter. The wounds on his hands, head, feet, and side had scabbed and mostly healed, leaving only faint scars. Little by little, he softened, became less afraid.

In fact, after so many days of observing the townspeople, Jesus became familiar with many of them by sight. There was the dark-skin woman who daily walked by in the early morning then returned late afternoon, the nicely dressed young light-skin woman who sped by in her yellow Chevy on the way to work most mornings, the older dark-skin gentleman in his grey fedora that talked to himself as he passed, the light-skin kid who rode his bicycle on the sidewalk daily, the light-skin man who opened Smith's Pharmacy every morning then closed it in the evening.

Then there was the young couple - he light-skin, she dark-skin - that occasionally walked by the store. Jesus recognized that this was very unusual - he had never seen two people with different skin colors walking together. In fact, whenever a dark-skin person was approached by a light-skin person, the dark-skin person almost always stepped to the side to let the light-skin person pass. This puzzled the Lord, as did the scornful looks that the mixed couple received from townspeople. And after a couple of weeks, he didn't see the mixed couple again.

One November afternoon, just as he was about to eat his Twinkie, KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK! Jesus inched over to the storage room door and peeked out. A large light-skin man in a uniform was standing at the front door peering in. The Lord flashed on the images of his first day when two uniformed men that had been dragged off fighting. KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK! Jesus trembled. The policeman then walked over and squinted through the pane glass window. The Son of God took a step back into the darkness. Finally, the officer left.

After gaining his composure, Jesus returned to the office to eat his meager meal. But as he entered the room, a multitude of tails scurried away; a pack of rats and not a crumb of Twinkie left. His stomach growled.

He knew this was the only food in the crowded shop. He knew every inch of the place and every item that lay dusty and unsold. Still, he wandered to the front of the shop, looking, hoping that maybe he had missed some small something that would assuage his hunger. But alas, nothing.

The Savior slumped against the front counter and stared out on the nearly empty street, which had been his daily custom. He gazed blankly at the shop across the street. Day after day, he had seen many citizens leaving Cho's Chinese Takeout with bags, but today, this hefty light-skin man exited while munching down on an egg roll. From the grin on his face, he was obviously very pleased with what he was eating.

That's when Jesus mustered the courage to leave the security of his sanctuary.

But seeing his own reflection in the glass, naked, except for a loincloth and sandals, he realized he would never fit in, and fitting in did seem the safest thing to do. He remembered seeing some men's clothing hanging in a wardrobe near the front of the store.

Sure enough, there were two pairs of pants and one long-sleeve shirt in the old oak cabinet. The first pair of pants were entirely too short, the second pair snug - the result of a diet of Twinkies, no doubt - but wearable. The shirt was light pink with purple, white, and pink stripes. He removed it from its hangar. In the pocket, a pencil and scrap of paper. Curious, the lord removed the contents from the shirt pocket, and like a kid, he scribbled lines and squiggles. Jesus grinned with satisfaction. Examining the shirt more closely, he saw letters on a worn piece of fabric clinging by a thread to the collar of the shirt. He had seen such marks on other objects and in the books tucked away in the back of the shop. He copied what was left of the worn label on the paper: C-h-r-i-s...D-i-o. His first attempt at writing resembled that of a 4 or 5-year-old. He beamed with pleasure.

Jesus wrangled the shirt on. It was tight, its sleeves a bit short, but it would have to do. He slipped on his sandals and made his way to the front door.

The savior took a deep breath and pulled on the door handle, but it wouldn't budge. He tried twisting the handle - it still would not open. He fumbled with a piece of metal above the doorknob. Click! The door swung open. Jesus focused on the restaurant just across the street, squinting against the light angling low as it does in late autumn. He stepped out, off the curb, then HONNNNNK, an 18-wheeler carrying a load of pine logs passed through him.

Jesus continued across Main Street, his eyes still focused on Cho's Chinese Takeout. He pushed on the door, it opened, he walked in.

"May I help you?" asked the young Chinese woman behind the counter. Jesus cocked his head. Not knowing what she meant, then said the first thing that came into his head, "Tell me a story."

"Sorry?" she asked and waited. "Did you want something to eat?" The young woman waited for a response. Not getting one, she turned and pointed at the pictures on a menu. "What would you like?" she asked.

The son of God looked the pictures over, saying nothing. "How about this?" she asked and pointed to the veggie fried rice. "OK?" she asked.

"OK." Jesus grinned. "Good."

Daisy Cho took pad and pencil in hand. "Name?" Jesus looked at her blankly. "What's your name?" the woman asked again, pointing at him as she scribbled the order on the pad.

Jesus' eyes lit up. He gleefully retrieved the paper scrap from his pocket and handed it to her.

From the back of the kitchen, old Mr. Cho yelled out, "You use zat Pine Sol again? Smell like forest in here!"

"OK," said the Ms. Cho, "that will be two dollars and twenty-five cents, Mr. Dio." Jesus had no idea what she meant. "Two dollars and twenty-five cents, please." Jesus continued smiling. "Just a minute," she said and walked back to the kitchen, returning moments later with her dad.

"Herro," said the toothless older man. "You new in town, yes? You have money?"

Jesus looked awkwardly around, still not knowing what to say. Then blurted, "Herro."

"You mock me?" asked Mr. Cho.

“Mock me,” echoed Chris Dio.

Mr. Cho’s daughter leaned over and whispered in her dad’s ear.

“OK, Mr. Dio, you look like gentle soul. You eat then wash dishes. Yes?”

“Yes.”

And that’s what Jesus - uh, Chris Dio - did that night and the next day and the next...