

# The Power Of Jesus

a short story by CORVIN THOMAS

**THE POWER** of Jesus — my mother believed in it. Not the kind of power that would make her tumors dissolve. No, she was a pragmatist. She prayed for *me*, that Jesus would seal her son's leaking soul, a soul stripped by apathy, an apathy fueled by disappointment, disillusionment, and drugs.

I went to Paris to dry out, to rehabilitate myself into a loving husband, and whatever else comes with sober living. Ostensibly I was there on my honeymoon, but people knew: the newsroom co-workers, the bar buddies. They knew. Maybe my mother knew, too. I was sick, and it hurt me to hear her prayers, because I didn't deserve them — not because my illness was self-made, but because she was the one who was dying. The prayers seemed misdirected.

Her letter was consoling, but the only words that registered were *cancer, tumors, liposarcoma*. Those and *come home*.

## TUESDAY, MARCH 20

**CALIFORNIA LOOKS** like it always does in the spring: sunny and bleak. It smells of acne soap and fear, tastes like the crumbled crackers of old Communion. The same thing happens every time I come back: an epileptic seizure of old memories.

*I'm sleeping in the back pew while my father sweats at the pulpit.*

*I'm watching my mother drive away, hoping she'll come back.*

*I'm crying under my father's belt for stealing pornography.*

*I'm feigning pain over my mother's remarriage.*

*I'm hiding from my father's screams, staring at my own ruined, stoned face in the mirror.*

My mother's main regret was that she never gave me the "loving family" she dreamed of, not with her second husband, nor with her third. It was a point of pride for my father, though. He felt he had raised me in a good environment. He even had us pose for a portrait one year, the two of us in matching Dacron shirts. I gave a copy to my mother. She cut out my father's face.

Sitting curbside at the airport in California, that same face, wilted by time, waits behind the wheel of a white Lincoln Town Car. My father's eyes, magnified by trifocal lenses, hold me. He licks his thin, colorless lips, a feminine gesture that matches the copper-colored permanent in his hair. He considers this hairstyle youthful, but it only highlights the

liver spots on his cheeks.

"I always thought I'd be the one to die first," he tells me.

I did, too. He's eighty, overweight, balancing prostate cancer and a palpitating heart. My mother, twelve years his junior, should not be the first to die. But they both believe in predestination. The power of Jesus is not arbitrary. This is His will.

My father cries. It's awkward. Not the tears. I understand the crying. But my father wants to see my mother, too. I am the passkey, the messenger, the forty-two-year-old go-between. Though they live less than twenty miles apart, only during my visits do they communicate, either through me or face to face in passing. While my father has spent his divorced life trying — and failing — to purge the past and assuage the pain of his biggest failure, my mother has moved from hatred to indifference. She still doesn't like him, says he misrepresented true Christian love, both as preacher and as husband. But she's gotten past that, lived several more lives of humiliation, death, divorce, breast cancer. Now she just doesn't care. He is the father of her son and, according to mutual acquaintances, a good man.

Not far from my mother's subdivision, we pass a cinder-block bar called the Rodeo. I imagine myself in a dark corner, getting up from a dirty table covered with empty bottles and shot glasses, asking the bartender for one more as I head to a bathroom with swinging doors. Inside the stall I unwrap the plastic bag, dip a key into the white powder, and inhale with all my might.

**MY MOTHER** shuffles out of the bathroom at her house.

"I'm sick, John," she says with a self-deprecating smile. "My baby boy."

We hug. She takes her time recognizing my father's presence. There are other people in the living room: her sister from Detroit, her daughter-in-law from her third marriage. My father jingles the change in his pocket until my mother is forced to respond. She always hated his nervous tics, his whistling and throat-clearing before sermons. The irritation is evident in her hello. After telling everyone how busy he's been, my father leaves.

I suddenly miss the diversion my father provided, because now I have to look at her: the distended stomach, the growing tumors that make her look nine months pregnant. It's her face, though, that tells me she's dying. Her almond-shaped

eyes have changed: deepened, softened by the morphine. And her voice is fading. She's resigned to death, but there's an aura about her, something holy, beatific: the calm of Christ before His betrayal.

**WHEN I** was a kid, my mother found cigarettes liberating, a preacher's wife's rebellion. She used to smoke in the backyard by the tomato plants. I'd catch her and threaten to tell my father, blackmail her for ice-cream money, refuse to clean my room.

"You know what?" she'd say. "I won't live forever. I'll be dead before you know it."

"So what?" I'd say with a hard heart, the evil power of adolescence.

"You'll be sorry, mister."

And she was right. She packed the car and drove away, smoking. I cleaned my room that day. But it was too late. I could tell by my father's low whistle and the echo of jingling change in the empty living room.

### WEDNESDAY, MARCH 21

**I'M SLEEPING** on the couch when the clock chimes five in the pitch black of morning. My mother walks by, casting a shadow on the hallway wall. She passes back and forth, as if looking for something, or getting ready to leave. This is a house of transition, and I feel like a squatter, trespassing on death's property.

My mother's been sick before: breast cancer ten years ago, two operations. Instead of coming home then, I asked her for a loan. I'd lost my job due to booze and gotten a DUI. I told her it was for rent.

"Whatever you need, sweetheart," she said.

I had no excuse when her last husband died. I just didn't go to the funeral. And I didn't come home when the tumors started five years ago, the liposarcoma. I didn't take time off from work for her first operation, or the second, the one that took her spleen, her bladder, and part of her liver.

"I'll be fine," she told me, and I believed her, because California was too far away from my drug dealers.

When I tried to make it up to her, I was really trying to make it up to myself. I took her on trips: Charleston, Savannah, Saint Simons Island. We stayed in nice hotels, took trolleys, rode in horse-drawn buggies. She sighed with love.

"You're such a good son," she told me from the hotel bed as I pretended to read, peeking over the pages until she was asleep. Then I escaped to the stool of a tourist-town tavern, as she lay sleeping with new tumors. She didn't tell me until she got home. She didn't want to spoil the trip, she said.

While I was in Paris a few months later, she told me that she wasn't going to fight it this time. She asked me to come stay with her, but not to cut my trip short; death would wait until I'd had my good time.

"You're living a fantasy," she wrote me. "Enjoy each day."

She says it again now as she rubs her belly in the morning sunlight: *enjoy each day*. "That's as bluntly as I can put it,"

she says from the couch, reclining to relieve the pressure on her lungs. She says there are two tumors: one where her bladder used to be, and one in the middle of her gut. The swelling could be fluid.

"The tumors survive on my fat," she says.

With each mouthful of food she swallows, the tumors steal half to help them grow, and they'll keep growing until they squeeze the breath out of her.

"That's how it was with my uncle," she says. "He went to sleep and didn't wake up. And that's how I hope it happens with me."

She's telling me this as if she were planning a vacation, giving me her disease itinerary. I listen without reaction. Her voice is a tinny echo of her real voice. I look at my hands but see her bloated stomach in my peripheral vision. She says she also has three spots on what's left of her liver. "But who knows?" She throws up her hands. "I could live another year."

She says she won't live a day longer than God wants her to live. And she already looks forward to being in heaven, seeing dead relatives and her third husband, and zipping through space to check on me. I anticipate her disappointment, the dirty deeds I'll no longer be able to hide.

"I'm at peace," she says, and I believe her.

She just doesn't want it to smell. "Have you ever smelled cancer?" she asks me. Her mother died of cancer when she was eighteen. "I don't want that smell in this house."

She gets up slowly to take another bath. An ice-cream truck drives by outside, its bells ringing a children's song that sounds like "Jesus Loves Me," but it's not.

### THURSDAY, MARCH 22

**THE HOSPICE** worker's name is Nikki. She feels my mother's stomach and feet, takes her blood pressure.

"One-twelve over eighty is good," she says with a Jamaican accent. "But let's keep her comfortable."

Nikki takes me into the kitchen to explain the bottles of pills in the refrigerator.

"This is the relief kit," she says, and my palms sweat like Judas's at the end of the table.

The lorazepam and Nembutal suppositories are for anxiety. The BDR suppositories are for nausea and vomiting. Acetaminophen suppositories are for fever and mild pain. The scopolamine and atropine are for noisy, wet breathing. Furosemide is for swelling. Docusate sodium is a stool softener. Cimetidine and Tagamet are for stomach problems. Vicodin is for pain. The Duragesic patches are squares of time-released morphine, 150 milligrams each. My mother's already wearing three of them but wants something more.

Nikki writes a prescription for Dilaudid and hands it to me.

"That's for the breakthrough pain," she says.

I close the door behind her and take two Vicodin.

"You've got such a good boy," my aunt says to my mother.

I get in the car and drive without conscience to the hospital to fill the prescription. The Vicodin hits me in the park-

ing lot. I stand in line, my forehead slowly melting, my arms too heavy to scratch the rash that's not there. No one seems to notice. There's too much talking, coughing, gasping. It's like a fast-food counter with oxygen tanks. The hospital workers wear faded blue coats. They move in a river of paper, names, and drugs, pulling prescriptions from boxes in the tall walls of pharmaceuticals. I hand a Pakistani woman my mother's insurance card. The woman looks at me. I feel like a fraud, even though I'm not. "It's for my mom," I say.

"I see that," the woman says, holding the script.

She walks away, passing a calendar on the wall, a Norman Rockwell painting of a Huck Finn type pouring a spoonful of medicine for his sick dog. I had the same picture on my bedroom wall when I was a kid. It's one of the things I stared at when my parents argued in the other room. When I got older, I threw away the picture but kept the frame.

"Sign here," the woman says, handing me a brown paper bag full of plastic bottles.

I sign with a hand of rubber.

Back at my mother's house, I tell her and my aunt the Dilaudid pills go for fifty bucks apiece on the street.

"How do you know that?" my aunt asks.

"I've done news stories about it," I lie.

They nod like sisters. My mother takes the Dilaudid. Thirty minutes later, I swallow one, too.

**WHILE CLEANING** up in Paris, I became a cliché. I wrote. My wife assumed it was cathartic. It wasn't. I just had better aim writing sober, remembered the bitterness more clearly.

The chronology of my story was simple. It started in church, with God: Accept Him as my personal savior and go to heaven. My father preached this message from the pulpit. My mother acquiesced. I held my sleeping head in the posture of prayer in the back pew.

The memories of home were different, clean: the crystalline days of summer and cutoff shorts, the smudge-pot smells of orange groves fighting a winter freeze, the sounds of fences falling to the Santa Ana winds. But each season brought another degree of hypocrisy. Jesus taught us to love one another, I was told. My father screamed. My mother screamed back. My mother had a nervous breakdown. My father had a heart attack.

"Do you want to be a preacher like your daddy?" the old women at church asked me.

I learned to lie and say yes.

There are things a child doesn't understand. My father worked two jobs: selling God at church, and selling ads for a weekly newspaper. My father called it "bartering" when a new bunk-bed set arrived. My mother called it "embezzlement" when the moving men took it back.

My mother worked nights for the sheriff's office as head of records: the "graveyard" shift, she said. She came home later and later, deeper and deeper into the morning, and I'd wonder if she was buried with the dead until I'd find her sleeping alone in bed.

My parents kissed, but it was just for show, like when they smiled in church, my father slapping backs and shaking hands,

my mother laughing with the old women. But then they talked about the church members on the way home, about the gossiping, the cheating, the cheapness. The congregation was made up of transplanted country people trying to find jobs in the Golden State. Hicks, my father called them. Rumormongers and blackmailers.

"Did you hear old lady Watson's prayer request?" my father asked from behind the wheel. " 'Let's pray for Gladys Jones's daughter, who's pregnant with that black boy's baby.' "

"Yes," my mother said, staring at the dashboard.

Then my father would mention how much the offering had brought in — his day's pay for preaching — and the talk would give way to the whisper of the country station on the radio and my father's whistling.

I remembered going to other churches before that, churches where people dressed nice. I remembered changing churches because of something unsaid, something that had made my father speak in low tones on the phone about secret meetings of the board of deacons. My mother had cried when we heard the word *fired*.

This church, the hick church, was a depot of desperation, a last chance to serve, and the hicks knew it. They condescended to my father in attitude and in pay. And my mother couldn't stand my father's weak spine, his supplication and false pride. She stopped going to church when I was eleven.

"Why do *we* have to go, then?" I asked my father from bed.

"Because I said so!" he yelled, and he slammed the door.

She wasn't there when we got home, just the faint smells of cigarette smoke and aerosol air freshener hinting at her defiance, her independence. The football game hummed in black and white, and my father snored in his chair of defeated colors. I missed my mother, her soft touch, the smell of coffee in her morning kisses. And I felt bad that I had misbehaved, defied and disrespected her, mimicking my father. I felt responsible. So I decided to make amends by petitioning God with my very soul.

I got saved.

*(end of excerpt)*