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WONDER BREAD

by Heather King

All that winter, deep into my self-deprivation, self-imposed poverty phase, I walked the filthy, noisy streets of downtown LA, my used laptop on my back, toting a Ralph's grocery bag containing my lunch: a quart yogurt container of brown rice and cabbage, a half-rotten apple, and a few crumbled matzohs (two boxes for ninety-nine cents at the ninety-nine-cent store). I wore black jeans (orange earplugs in one pocket), a heavy cotton pullover, a polar fleece jacket, and a purple scarf. I walked from Lucas and Sixth (because I could park there for free) half a mile west to the county law library (because it opened at 8:30, compared to 10:00 for the public library), then to the park adjacent to the superior courthouse at lunch (because it had a public bathroom and a fountain), and afterward to the public library at Olive and Fifth. Laden with a backpack full of books, feeling broken and lost and rag-and-bone — gray sky, honking horns, sunless streets hemmed in by grimy buildings — I thought over and over: *Christ nailed to a cross. Christ nailed to a cross.*

With a laptop (albeit a used one) on my back, a roof over my head, and a wage-earning husband at home, I wasn't poor by a long shot, but I did have a particular poverty of [the] spirit. I'd been diagnosed with breast cancer the previous year, and I was still feeling shaken and raw, still grieving the loss of a kind of innocence I'd never known I had, still assimilating the fact that the rest of my life would be overshadowed by the possibility of recurrence. I'd always been anxious about my writing, but now, more than ever, I was haunted by the fear that I would die without ever having published a book. And in my anxiety, and the twisted thinking that anxiety generates, it seemed the best way to get a book published was to write as much as I could while living off the nest egg I'd saved while working as a lawyer. It was as if by making my needs smaller, making do with less, I could ensure there'd be less of me to suffer if the cancer came back, less of me to feel the pain of rejection from publishers, less of me to die a failure. I'd developed an agenda, so deeply buried it was hidden even from myself: to get through each day spending the least amount possible.

I didn't know this, and then again on some level I did: it flickered in and out of my consciousness like a match in the wind; like my on-again, off-again relationship with my husband, my friends, myself. *Save, save, save; work, work, work.* Why wouldn't the world just leave me alone to write? It's what God wanted me to do, I believed. I thought I was being holy.

Christ had nowhere to lay his head, and neither, or so it felt that winter, did I.. I roamed from library to library because my husband was home asleep, having worked the night shift as a nurse and, being too cheap to rent even a tiny office, I had nowhere else to go. Sometimes at noon I'd walk down Flower to

Ninth for mass at Our Lady, a narrow, time-lost chapel sandwiched between the Orchid Hotel and American Computer. The foyer smelled of mothballs, and a shiny porcelain bas relief of Mary, circa 1940 — green velvet cowl, dark lashes, petunia-pink lips — gazed down from above the sanctuary door. The sanctuary itself was windowless and claustrophobic. The sort of people who looked like they slept in residential hotels and cooked on hot plates sat here and there, clutching plastic rosaries and moaning prayers. Against the back wall rested a wooden crucifix, for those who felt the need to stroke Jesus's feet or kiss his wounds.

What struck me most about Christ that winter was his smallness, his hiddenness: his unremarkable early life as a carpenter; his ragtag, spiritually undistinguished group of disciples; the way, after the Resurrection, nobody had recognized him. Here in this church at least, he remained small and hidden. The little unassuming chapel, with its chintzy tabernacle, was dwarfed by the towering banks and investment firms and lawyers' offices that surrounded it. We fallen, lonely strangers, converging on South Flower, were hardly the people any public-relations savvy Messiah would choose to glorify his cause.

And yet things happened in that little chapel. People with briefcases and business suits got down on their knees and buried their faces in their hands. The elderly priest sometimes talked about his struggles and failures, which made you feel not quite so bad about your own. . At the sign of peace, we took each other's hands and sometimes even smiled. This was where we found Him, among these wax flowers and stifled sighs; this was the Church we had built for Him. And so we came with our burdens, our fragile flesh, but also with our little spark that the meanness of the world had not quite extinguished, our little flame of obedience, our ridiculous stubborn belief that the Body of Christ was not a symbol but food, real food. Each tiny, broken piece of bread might enable us broken people to go out — anonymous, small, hidden — and transform the world.

I wasn't the only one who needed a place to hang out during the day. At the county law library, where I spent my mornings, there were several other regulars: the guy with the white ponytail who sat talking to himself by the *Southwest Reporters*; the glassy-eyed woman who stood for hours at the Xerox machine with the same page poised over the glass. We never exchanged words [stet] — we were all in our own little worlds — but in a strange way I felt more connected to these outcasts than I did to the people with cellphones and expensive [stet] haircuts who were technically my peers. I wrote at an isolated desk on the west wall reserved "For Computer Use Only," my nearest neighbor a fellow in the federal-supplements alcove who had a tubercular cough and a notebook full of unintelligible scribbles.

The LA Central Library, where I spent my afternoons, had a whole community of people who made it their daytime home. It was much noisier than the law library. On Lower Level 4 — history and travel — a guard in a blue satin bomber jacket patrolled the stacks, reminding people they weren't allowed to sleep, or

telling some nutcase to keep it down, or cautioning me to take my laptop with me when I went to the bathroom. I jammed in my orange earplugs and wrote for another couple of hours, after which I trolled the stacks for books: music and art on the second floor, popular literature on the mezzanine, spirituality and religion on Lower Level 3.

One of the books I read that winter was *The Diary of a Country Priest*, by Georges Bernanos. This priest has a deep faith, but he's an utter failure: sickly, weak, ineffective, an object of scorn in his own parish. One day his only friend, the Curé de Torcy, reminds him that it's through poverty and suffering that we find God. This doesn't mean turning our backs on our poor brothers and sisters—our duty is always to treat our neighbor as ourselves; it only means that our deepest poverty is spiritual. "Poverty is the image of your own fundamental illusion," the Cure says, "...the emptiness in your hearts and in your hands"...

"Your own fundamental illusion": what was mine? That the point of writing — of any work worth doing — is ever anything besides the work itself? That I couldn't be happy till I sold a book? That the success I longed for would fix me? I kept thinking of a Richard Rohr essay in which he described going to a monastery and meeting one particular monk, a hermit who lived in a hut in the mountains. They met only once and chatted briefly. Twenty years later, Rohr returned to this same monastery and, by chance, ran into the same monk while walking in the woods. Thinking there was no way the hermit would recognize him after all that time, and not wanting to disturb his solitude, Rohr was prepared to pass silently by. Instead, the hermit stopped, embraced him, and began talking as if they'd broken off a conversation not five minutes before. "Richard," he said, "you must tell them! Tell them God is not out there. He's *in here*." He pointed to his heart, and then he continued on his way.

Every day on the streets I saw at least one person I recognized from the Skid Row soup kitchen where I'd volunteered a couple of years before: A thirtyish man in a frayed sports coat and K-Swiss sneakers who paced outside the Y; a fat guy with thick black glasses and mad-scientist hair snoozing on a bench near City Hall, his pockets stuffed with what he claimed were CIA papers.

One afternoon down by Our Lady, a toothless woman in white go-go boots tottered up, her palm out. With a sigh, I took out my wallet.

"Oh, look, she gave all she had," she crooned, as I extracted a one from a wad of fives and tens.

Was she mocking me? I thought, remembering Luke's parable of the widow who gave her last coin: how the Pharisees had given from their excess, while she had given from her want. I was giving from my excess, and the woman and I both knew it.

"All she had," she murmured lovingly, and she walked away.

Biblical scenes coming to life on the streets of twenty-first-century LA? This was getting creepy. Why didn't I have a country cottage with a fireplace to write in front of? Why didn't I have a room of my own, like Virginia Woolf? Why, after working my ass off for eight years, was I wandering around downtown

having encounters with the modern-day equivalents of lepers and mutes? If something didn't break pretty soon, I thought, I'd end up standing on a street corner myself, croaking, "Pick up your mat and walk!" or "By his stripes, you were healed!" to random passersby.

Another book that made an impression on me that winter was by Margaret Wertheim. It was called *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*, and it described the fascinating world of quantum physics in terms even a science ignoramus like me could understand. One part I found particularly gripping was the 1920 discovery, by a Russian named Theodor Kaluza, of a fifth dimension. I'd always assumed a new dimension would be unimaginably huge. Instead, Wertheim wrote, it was absolutely minute: "Its circumference was just 10^{-23} centimeters — a hundred billion billion times smaller than the nucleus of an atom! . . . So small was Kaluza's dimension that even if we ourselves were the size of atoms we would still not notice it. Yet this tiny dimension could be responsible for all electromagnetic radiation."

Could there be a more exciting paradigm for the smallness, the poverty, the hiddenness of Christ? It was the Mystery of the Incarnation, the Word made Flesh in one man who had died, been resurrected and gone invisibly out to reside with every one of us other billions of human beings as we tried to love our neighbor as ourself. Every infinitesimal thought, word, and deed counted, everything registered, everything absolutely affected everyone else. The smallest act of charity helped: every perfunctory smile at the Kiss of Peace, every plastic-rosary prayer, every reluctantly coughed-up dollar. The most ostensibly unremarkable person played an integral part: the man in the K-Swiss sneakers, Joe with his CIA papers, the woman in the white go-go boots, me. The most fleeting, seemingly mundane interactions had life-changing potential: Not out there, but in here; interactions between people who were hungry and thirsty and lonely and lost: who were, one way or the other, in need. Of course Biblical scenes were taking place on the streets of twenty-first-century LA: through the multi-dimensional mystery of the human encounter, they'd been taking place every second--opening our hearts, confounding every expectation, waking us up--for thousands of years.

One drizzly morning not long afterward, I was walking east on First on my way to the law library. For lunch I'd packed some rice cakes with hummus, an orange, and a yogurt container of white beans with kale. I was just wishing I'd thrown in an oatmeal cookie or two when I passed a grimy sleeping bag with a person-shaped lump inside. *Poor bastard*, I thought--the air was raw that morning--and though homeless people were all too common in downtown LA, I was seized by the conviction that I should give this one my lunch.

I can't describe how out of character this was for me. Ordinarily my mind would have raised a host of objections: one meal would change nothing for this man, who probably wouldn't even want my hippie-dippy food; if I was going to give anything to this person, who hadn't even asked for a handout, why not

money? I'll never understand why I stopped and turned around. A misfired synapse? Every one of the trillions of choices I had made in my life converging to bring me to this point? The 10^{-23} centimeter-in-circumference fifth dimension leading me to, for once, cede reason and offer my actions up to the universe? Whatever the cause, I walked back to the sleeping bag.

"I'm going to leave some food out here," I said. "There's a fork and a napkin and everything."

I'd pictured a wraith-like being, half-dead, far too exhausted to rouse him- or herself from slumber. Instead, the man sat bolt upright as if a spring had been released. He was a handsome, healthy-looking African American in his early thirties. "Why thank you, ma'am. That's very kind of you," he said cheerfully, peering into the bag. "I'll eat it right away!"

Somehow I knew we were both going to make it.

And the next day I started looking for an office.