

The Kiss of the Sun

Dear God, if you're there please help me. It echoed in my mind. I haven't prayed in years, but I need you now. I guess lots of people only come to you when they want something from you. That must be pretty horrible. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd come to church. I'm sorry to be one of those people but please, please help me if you can. Please give me the courage to leave or the strength to stay, just don't leave me like this. If I stay, I know dad's going to grind me down to nothing until I'm just a puff of ash, until I might as well not exist anymore. Every day I'm here I'm worn down a bit more. It's like acid rain on your stone statues outside, the poison eating away at me and carving into my heart. But if I leave now I'll have nothing; only the clothes I'm wearing and boxes of my paltry possessions. Other than that, I've got nothing to my name and no one on my side. Please help me, Lord. Amen.

My prayer reminded me of a prayer my mum used to say; 'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.' Ironically enough, that prayer was often quoted in Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery groups.

Mum had brimmed with serenity and wisdom but she never had much courage to change things. Up against my dad, she always bent to his will and let him have his way. 'Anything for a quiet life,' she would say, smiling. If only I was like that, I might have been able to put up with him – to adapt. If only I could be like that now.

I waited patiently, not one of my strengths, hoping for a word or a message, even just an acknowledgement that I'd been heard. I barely breathed as I listened for any

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response but all I could hear were gentle footsteps echoing along the flagstones, murmured voices bouncing off the high stone walls and the slow creak of the pews unwinding in the warm afternoon. The honey wax enveloped me and soothed my nerves a little.

I left the church that day with no answer but with a germ of hope. Maybe He was checking my records and deciding whether or not I had sufficiently atoned for my many errors and earned myself a favour.

I pushed open the low metal gate into dad's front garden. The eternal screech of the hinges reminded me of sneaking back home late at night as a teenager. I soon learned to use the neighbour's gate then silently hop over the dividing fence, but my dad often caught me anyway. I was probably noisier than I thought back then in my drunken ignorance. Dad used to rant at me until I locked myself in my room then he'd start the argument again in the morning when my hangover was at its peak. At 16, I quit sneaking around and just came home whenever I wanted. At first, dad didn't seem to know how to handle that; it was like I'd changed the rules and he hadn't learned how to play yet. At 17, I was staying overnight with friends and boyfriends more often than I slept at home. He didn't quit the arguments though so at 18, I officially moved in with my boyfriend of four months – a long-term relationship by my standards. That one only lasted a few more months but it was long enough to establish that I'd left home forever. Or so I'd thought.

'Where've you been?' he said as I opened the front door. The opening strike.

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'Just out walking,' I lied. I wondered if he knew I'd had to get away from him for a while. I'd never tell him about the church; that was mum's thing, and dad had always looked down on it. He'd barely tolerated mum's interest but he'd pour scorn on me for that, especially after everything I'd done.

'You should have told me you were going out, we need a lot more food now you're living here too.'

'That's fine,' I held back a sharper response. 'Just make me a list and I'll do a big shop later.' I loved being able to drive now; it gave me a rare sense of capability and maturity.

'That doesn't help now though, does it? We need something for lunch.'

'Fine, I'll go now.' I wished that "going" was more permanent, but sadly I'd have to come back again.

I headed up to my old bedroom which still boasted some old posters from my teenage years of Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt, Val Kilmer, and some old pop groups which fizzled out years ago. Nothing had changed here in the years I'd been gone; the pink-flowered wallpaper still clashed with the dark Buffy the Vampire Slayer curtains and the painted black wardrobe from my goth stage. Old games and soft toys littered the shelves under a dense layer of dust. It was like walking into a time capsule. I was fortunate my bedroom was a decent size but it was currently filled with over a decade of my built-up belongings. There was a tower of cardboard boxes and bin bags of my clothes that I'd been working around for a fortnight now. At some point I'd have to unpack more than just my essentials but the thought of unpacking my things here felt too final. While my things were still packed up, I could fool myself into thinking this was just a temporary relocation.

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'Paula,' he shouted up the stairs, 'we need a newspaper too, for the jobs section.

You should be able to find *some* kind of work in there.'

'Fine,' I called. He simply couldn't resist putting the boot in. I'd told him I had a bit of money saved up and we'd agreed on my contribution towards the bills so he knew there wasn't a mad rush for a job but he got angry at the thought of unemployment. As a teenager, I'd struggled to understand my dad. What he did and said often baffled me as much as it annoyed me. Since I'd been away though and mixed with more people, I'd learned more about him. For instance, I realised now that the thought of being unemployed with no income terrified him. He'd only retired two years ago – reluctantly – to nurse mum in her final months. If it wasn't for dad's generous pension and his own deteriorating health, he'd have been back out working within a month of mum's death. I'd often come to visit her but I never stayed very long because dad was even harsher back then when she was ill. Now though, I was back.

In the kitchen I drew up a shopping list focusing on practicalities rather than personalities. Very little had changed in the kitchen – or anywhere else in the house. The newest additions were a dishwasher and a lightweight kettle I'd bought for mum so she could make her own hot drinks in those last months when she found everything so exhausting.

As I rummaged through the cupboards, I came across jars of homemade jam mum had made. She'd written the flavours of the jam on the lid of each jar, her handwriting neat and elegant, just as she had been. All her favourites were here; raspberry and apple, strawberry, blueberry, plum, spiced blackberry and apple, blackcurrant, and two jars of my favourite: gooseberry.

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Suddenly I was crushed in an avalanche of sorrow, winded by grief. For a moment I couldn't breathe. All these jams, all these preserves, all made when she was fit and healthy. All made by my mum after she grew the berries in her garden, planted and pruned, or plucked from "pick your own" orchards. That was when she stewed and mashed the fruit and carried heavy saucepans with ease, her long lustrous hair tied back. The house smelled of berries for days after that and bright jars of the juicy fruit coloured the kitchen.

I could almost imagine her with me then, making her favourite treat, labelling the jars and anticipating savouring her work in the months ahead, the months that never came for her. The jar of raspberry and apple jam in my hand had outlived my mum. She'd never get to bite into one of her sumptuous jam tarts again or spread the bright jelly onto a slice of hot toast. The injustice of it nearly killed me.

How could it be that my gentle and loving mum, who had never been cruel to anyone and only ever made the world a better place, was taken so callously? Why her?

And why not my dad? I felt wicked for thinking that but I'd lived with that thought for a long time, ever since mum was diagnosed, and I'd learned to let that thought come then go. I'd prayed to God at the beginning begging him to spare her but he'd refused. Then I'd asked him over and over why He'd taken my mum and left my dad, but the only answer I got was that "God works in mysterious ways." As unsatisfying as that was, I had to accept it; there was no alternative.

Ten years or so ago I would have gone on the attack with everyone and everything but those years of struggle, desperation, drink and drugs had taught me a lot. I wasn't the same person who'd stormed out of the house at 18 years old swearing never to return.

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I was sure when my dad looked at me now he saw me not as an adult who'd survived by myself for years with nothing to start with and no one to help me, but as that stroppy teenager who fought with my dad about everything. Maybe one day he'd see I'd changed. Maybe one day he'd forgive me. I'd never needed to seek forgiveness from my mum; I knew she always loved and forgave me and she knew I always loved her. Ours was a simple pure love.

One of mum's favourite quotes was "to err is human; to forgive, divine" and she truly lived that way. She was the most forgiving and divine person I'd ever known. She forgave me and my dad over and over again and she still loved us both.

I carefully rested the jam jar in the cupboard and went out for the shopping.

A few strained days passed and I still hadn't had any sign from God so I returned to the church. I stopped at the entrance though when I heard a crowd singing inside. I guessed it was a Christening because I hadn't seen anything like a wedding car or hearse outside but the small car park was full.

I was surprised how disappointed I felt not to be able to get inside right away. I'd been anxiously waiting for help and suddenly I couldn't stand waiting any longer.

The situation at home had grown worse by the day. I felt like I'd crossed a line of no return at church when I'd admitted in my prayer that things were so bad and that I needed help. Since admitting that, the problem had crystallised and it was impossible to ignore now. There were so many harsh comments and jibes at home, so many interrogations, so many demands, and they all seemed to be piling up in a heap to crush me.

Seeking peace, I wandered around the graveyard then strolled along the winding path to the public garden behind the church.

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The garden was such a beautiful sight that I felt I'd just stepped into a photo. The heavenly scent of sweet pollen drifted on the breeze, bringing this vision to glorious life. The lawn was a vibrant green and set with a paving stone path winding like a ribbon through the garden. Tall mature trees flanked the garden, with small bushes and flower beds bursting with bright spring colours. Vivid yellow daffodils and narcissus swayed in the gentle breeze alongside pools of red, pink and purple tulips and crocus, and plump brilliant blue hyacinths. It was like walking through a dream. The air was wonderfully perfumed with those sweet and heady flowers and it lulled me into a trance.

I made my way to the bench where my mum and I had often sat together. Not much had changed here; the trees were taller and there was some more paving but the garden was essentially as I remembered it.

I let my mind wander and remembered going to church with my mum and playing in the public garden but I never really appreciated the artistry of the plants and flowers as a child. I used to love running wild around the garden, gathering and playing with conkers from the horse chestnut trees and helicopter seeds from the sycamore trees and building imp homes in the flower beds. Knowing my mum loved the flowers, one day I had picked some flowers for her but when I proudly handed her the posy she asked me not to do that again. She thanked me for the thought but explained that by picking the flowers I'd stopped anyone else enjoying them. She said the flowers would quickly die when they were picked and taken from their natural environment. Now, I could see the beauty of the garden from an adult viewpoint and I completely understood my mum's point of view.

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I don't know how long I sat there in the warm sunshine listening to the leaves fluttering in the breeze and birds trilling around me, but it was long enough for every muscle to relax like honey on warm toast. It had been a very long time since I'd felt this calm and peaceful.

A saying from my childhood floated into my mind; "the kiss of the sun for pardon, the song of the bird for mirth, one is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth." I remembered that proverb had been inscribed on a wooden plaque that mum nailed to her garden shed many years ago. The last time I'd seen it was when I came home for mum's funeral two years ago and I noticed it had softened and worn away at the edges from years of weathering. I remembered seeing it then because I was committing every little detail to memory at the time and the sign seemed to hold a lot more significance than simple poetry on a plaque.

Mum had loved her garden especially in the spring and summer when everything burst to life in a riotous fury of colour and fragrance welcoming every insect and animal into her creation.

Memories of my nurturing and gentle mum filled my heart and mind and I revelled in the warmth of that treasured love. It was often difficult to revisit those memories without the stab of sorrow marring the joy, but right now I only felt love.

To escape the torment of grief at losing mum, I had at first turned to familiar false friends in alcohol, marijuana and cocaine – anything to take me away. It took me a long time to learn to cope without those crutches.

I'd lost my job when those crutches tripped me up and I soon ran out of money. I was struggling to pay my rent even though it was a cheap and shabby apartment, so I'd begged my dad for money. He wouldn't help me. He said I needed psychiatric treatment not money, and he wouldn't help me at all until I stopped drinking and

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using drugs. We'd had several arguments about that growing more aggressive and demanding as I became more desperate. My last attempt with dad ended with me stealing all the cash in his wallet. I knew he wouldn't help me after that and I'd had no one else to turn to; I wasn't close with the rest of my family and my few friends had given up on me a long time ago. I'd burned every bridge.

I was at my lowest and most desperate level with no other options when I agreed to sleep with my dealer for one more score. Afterwards, I'd cried like a helpless baby. It was the first time since mum's funeral that I'd properly cried and once I'd started I just couldn't stop. I cried for hours and fell asleep sobbing. I cried for losing my mum, for my dad turning his back on me, for the chokehold that drugs and drink had on me, and for the loss of myself – for the bright and decent child I used to be.

When I got up the following morning, before I was even fully awake, I quickly flushed the last of my cocaine down the toilet and poured all my alcohol down the sink. It was hell but I didn't touch any more drugs again. I couldn't quite stop the alcohol completely though; I still needed that to cope with my new life.

A movement to my left caught my eye and drew me out of my reverie. It was an elderly man strolling along the path towards me with a small white poodle straining against its lead trying to charge off the path.

I had a vague sense of recognition, not uncommon in my hometown, but I slipped my gaze from his eyes. I didn't want to encourage conversation, I only wanted peace and quiet while I waited to ask God for help again. I kept my eyes low gazing off in the middle distance and hoping the man would quietly pass me.

The poodle's claws scrambled against the path manically, in stark contrast to the man's slow stride. When I'd first spotted him I'd noticed his slow pace and low

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shoulders. He was a man running low on energy, like a houseplant deprived of water and sunshine, turning yellow and drooping sadly.

The dog sniffed at me eagerly and stretched up to put its front paws on my lap demanding attention. My fondness for animals, dogs in particular, broke through my reluctance and I found myself stroking its fluffy head.

'Libby, down,' the man said, but even I could hear there was no real command there.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'she doesn't listen to me at all.'

'It's fine, I love dogs.'

The man seemed to ponder for a second.

'You're Bill Holland's daughter aren't you?'

'Yes,' I admitted, 'I'm Paula.' My heart sank. If he knew who I was then I was sure he'd know a lot of the horrible things I'd done. That was the trouble with living in a small town; everyone knew everyone else's business. If I had my way, I'd be living miles away, anywhere else except here where my past weighed me down like an anchor.

'You probably don't remember me, I'm Tony Adams.' He eased himself onto the bench beside me. 'I used to live a few doors down from your mum and dad?'

'Oh yes,' the memory clicked into place. 'I crashed into your car door once when I was cycling on the pavement.'

'That's right! I felt awful about that. I remember you crying because I'd knocked you off your bike but I think I was more upset afterwards than you were.'

'You probably were. As soon as I got home mum put a couple of plasters on my leg and elbow and I was fine then.' The casual mention of my mum had come out of the blue and it didn't burn my chest quite as much as usual.

'Are you visiting your dad?' he asked.

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'Um, I'm actually staying here for a while.' I was relieved he didn't want to talk about my mum, but discussing my dad could prove just as distressing.

'I haven't seen him in a while. How is he?'

'Not great,' I hedged. 'I'm actually home to help him a bit.'

'Oh, that's good of you. I know he's in a pretty bad way. That's the trouble with old age, it doesn't come alone.'

'No.' Something heavy and lonely pulled at my heart. He was smiling at me encouragingly and a wave of shame lowered my gaze. It wasn't "good of me" to be helping my dad at all; it was guilt and desperation that had driven me back home.

'It must be difficult for you,' he offered. 'I know what it's like to have to care for your loved ones. I nursed my wife Joan through her last months. Cancer.' He turned his attention to the poodle at our feet, shielding his face as he bent down to stroke her.

'I'm so sorry to hear that. I didn't know she'd passed away.'

He nodded, still focused on the dog. 'It was ten months ago. Libby and I were just visiting the grave, dropping off some flowers. It would have been her birthday today. I brought Libby along but, obviously, she doesn't really know what's going on.' He smiled. 'Libby was really Joan's dog. They doted on one another. I've never seen that kind of connection before, they truly loved each another. Poor girl was devastated when Joan passed away.'

I took a steadying breath. 'I know what that feels like. I was heartbroken when my mum died.'

'Yes, I heard about that when I moved back here. I was very sorry to hear the news and sorry I couldn't make it to the funeral, I didn't know about it at the time. She was a lovely lady.'

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I nodded silently, swallowing around a boulder of grief in my throat. It wasn't like me to be so emotional but I was stretched to breaking point by my dad's harsh treatment, by waiting impatiently for a response from God, and dwelling on thoughts of mum just before Mr Adams arrived. My emotions had already been hauled towards the surface and it only took a small comment like that to break the skin and let my grief burst through and smother me.

I missed her so much every day in a thousand different ways. I missed the gentle rhythm of her voice, her warm smile and rich laugh, her long arms which always gave me such tight hugs. I missed smelling her favourite honey and amber perfume in those hugs and feeling wrapped in a blanket of love. She was truly incredible and I loved her with all my heart. She was the kind of person you'd be honoured to call a friend; so kind, generous, thoughtful, funny and wise. When she went, she left a great gaping chasm in my heart, an abyss so immense that I knew for a certainty nothing and no one could ever fill it. I didn't know then and still don't know now, what I was meant to do with my life without her.

Mr Adams placed his warm hand on mine. There was so much sympathy and understanding in that tiny gesture that a stream of warmth flowed up my arm and straight to my heart.

We sat quietly for a moment, both thinking of our lost loves.

'At least you've still got your dad,' he offered finally. 'How is he exactly? Is he up to having a visitor?'

'Well, he's not doing brilliantly but I'm sure he'd be very happy to see you.' I was pleased to change the subject to my dad now. 'Did you know about his knee op? He was very immobile until recently but he can just about get around on crutches now.'

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'Oh, poor chap. Is he in very much pain?'

'Yes, that's one of the worst things. We're trying to get his painkillers right for him but it's taking a while.'

'That can't be easy,' he said, 'not for either of you.'

'No, it's not. It's making him a bit grouchy actually. I know he doesn't really mean it but that doesn't make it any easier. Well I hope he doesn't mean it anyway!' But deep down I suspected he did.

'I'm sure he doesn't,' he said earnestly.

'I'm not so sure.'

I took a moment to decide whether to continue or not. Mr Adams just watched me patiently, letting me choose my route.

'It's just really difficult,' I said, 'sometimes impossible, to do anything right. He's so critical. Everything I do and say is wrong according to him. I wake him up when he wanted to rest and I don't wake him up when he wanted to be up and about. I don't make his meals right, don't clean the house well enough, I buy the wrong loo roll for goodness sake!' Now I'd started, I couldn't seem to stop the words pouring out.

Mr Adams laughed gently.

'It's really hard living with him again. I'm just stuck in the house with him all the time or out running errands for him. It's worse than having a baby.'

'It must be hard work,' he said, 'especially with the criticisms. When Joan was getting bad it was hard to do everything right and look after all her needs like a fulltime carer. The trouble was I still wanted to be her husband and there were not many opportunities to do that, to just be us. As she got worse she became more frustrated and more irritable. So I had to remind myself that she didn't mean to hurt or upset me, it was just her way of coping.'

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'I'm fairly sure my dad does sometimes mean to upset me. I think he's getting back at me for all the hurt I caused him in the past.' I meant it to sound light-hearted but the sentence crashed down around us.

'Obviously you know your dad a lot better than me but I can't believe he'd ever want to intentionally hurt you. He loves you very much.'

'Even after everything I did?' I asked quietly.

'Yes, even then. Look, he knows you were having a very hard time too when your mum passed away and that was your way of coping with it. I know it took a long time to adjust to being alone and his way of coping was to isolate himself. But that was the last thing he needed really. I wasn't here then, but I heard he'd cut off a lot of his friendships. It took him a long time to get balanced again. After that he began to worry about you a lot. I think he felt he'd let you down when you needed him most and he just didn't know how to help you.'

'I don't think he could have helped me really. I think it took me hitting rock bottom before I realised I had to sort myself out. And I'm still not quite there yet.'

'Do you know, I reckon your dad might actually be trying to help you now with all his demands? Well, to some extent anyway. He might be worried about you going off on your own again. Maybe he's trying to keep you close to protect you?'

'I don't know, maybe. I hadn't thought about that. But I can't spend the rest of my life like this. I honestly don't know if I can spend the rest of the month like this.' I fought to stop myself crying. 'I actually came here a few days ago to ask God for the courage to leave or the strength to stay, because I can't go on like this.' Tears blurred my vision.

He thought for a moment, considering my position.

'Has it occurred to you that there might be another option?'

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My whirling thoughts slowed.

‘Another option? What other option?’

‘You could talk to your dad about all this. It sounds like your dad could do with a bit of outside help and you need some space of your own too. Perhaps later on you could look for a part-time job out of the house or take up a hobby so you’ve got something to do other than caring for your dad? Just don’t give up hope.’

‘I thought I already had,’ I admitted.

‘No you hadn’t.’ He smiled gently. ‘After all, you had enough hope to come here looking for help.’

‘So, do you think God will help me? Will He give me an answer?’

He thought for a minute. ‘Well, there’s a saying that “God doesn’t give us what we want, he gives us what we need,” and He’s given you spirit, liveliness, kindness and hope. Maybe if He hasn’t given you an answer it’s because He wants you to ask someone else the question. Maybe he wants you to talk to your dad?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Look at it this way, with everything else that’s gone on between you, what more harm could it possibly do?’

I smiled but tears still pooled in my eyes.

‘Tell you what,’ he said. ‘How about Libby and I pop round one day to see you and your dad? Maybe he could do with a friend, someone to chat to?’

‘That sounds like a great idea, thanks. I’m sure that’ll help us both.’ I smiled at him, the first genuine smile I’d given in weeks and I reached down to stroke Libby again. Maybe Mr Adams was my answer.

In my mind I was already planning the visit – I could do some sandwiches and mix up a salad and as a special treat I’d make some jam tarts using mum’s homemade

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jam. I could set up the garden table and chairs so we can sit out in the sunshine.

I'm sure the chairs are still in the garden shed, the one with mum's proverb on it saying "The kiss of the sun for pardon..."