

## TOUCHSTONES

## Grace



WHEN I WAS twelve, I was boy-crazy. Sometimes I even kissed boys in the halls at school. Enjoying the power that the promise of such kisses held. Imagining myself a winsome beauty. Relishing the whispers of girls who gossiped about such things. Knowing that I was the center of scandal.

When I was thirteen and was diagnosed with bone cancer, I started to feel guilty about my boy-craziness. When someone

suggested that my cancer was God's way of punishing me for kissing boys during my lunch hour, I believed them. I knew I was supposed to wait for such things until I was sixteen or until I was engaged to a good Mormon boy. Maybe God knew that the only way for me to ever end up worthy for the temple was to make me so sick that I no longer thought about boys.

Now, with that temple marriage behind me and more than twenty years since my di-

agnosis, I still wonder why I got cancer. But I have given up believing that my cancer was God's doing. He and I have talked about that. And I now know that it was as hard on him as it was on me.

JANA BOUCK REMY  
Irvine, California

MY MISSIONARY COMPANION AND I had ordered some gyoza in what was a small, dark, considerably less-than-two-star cafe in Yamagata, Japan. He suggested we say grace, so we bowed our heads slightly and I said a quick but typical Mormon food thing: "... and bless this food to nourish and strengthen our bodies."

About a minute later, a cat slunk across the dirt floor with a rat weakly squirming in its jaws. Cats with rats are not entirely unusual in Japan, so we chuckled and turned back to our appointment book. A few minutes later, I went to use the restroom and happened to glance into the kitchen where I saw the cook filleting the rat into our gyoza.

We got the heck out of there. I wonder, if we'd stayed, whether God would have graced us with the nourishment and strengthening of our bodies.

D. JEFF BURTON  
Bountiful, Utah

SUNSTONE IS NOW ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS FOR TOUCHSTONES, A NEW section inspired by "Readers Write" in The SUN magazine. SUNSTONE readers are invited to submit their own short memoirs on a theme selected by the editors. The next topic to be featured in the magazine is WEALTH. Upcoming topics include SMALL MIRACLES and LETTERS HOME.

Differing from the letters to the editor section, topics and their corresponding deadline for submissions will be decided by SUNSTONE's staff prior to publication and announced in forthcoming issues. Topics will be intentionally broad in order to give room for personal expression. Writing style will not be as important as the contributor's thoughtfulness, humor, and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we will be unable to print all the submissions we receive. We will edit pieces, but contributors will have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication.

We will be publishing only nonfiction pieces in TOUCHSTONES. If it allows you to feel less inhibited, you are free to submit your memoirs under "Name Withheld"—but be sure to include your name and mailing address so we can send you a complimentary magazine if we use your work. Occasionally we might choose not to publish a name mentioned in your reflection, or will use only a first name and last initial. If SUNSTONE chooses to do this, it is not intended to appear as if we're questioning the truthfulness of the writing but is out of sensitivity to privacy issues. Please let us know if you've already changed the names of the people involved in your accounts.

To submit a reflection, please send it typed and double-spaced to SUNSTONE, 343 North Third West, Salt Lake City, Utah, 84103. If you cannot type, please print clearly. Electronic submissions can be sent via email to TOUCHSTONES editor Allen Hill at: allen@sunstoneonline.com. Again, due to space limitations, submissions should be kept somewhere around 400 words at most, but we are willing to make exceptions for exceptional pieces. We're thankful for all submissions we receive and look forward to reading your TOUCHSTONES.

THE DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS ON WEALTH IS 10 MARCH

### Upcoming Topics and Deadlines

SMALL MIRACLES: 30 APRIL  
LETTERS HOME: 30 JUNE



ONE SUNDAY, THE priest handed out large, gold-painted crucifixes to my catechism class. As he rambled, like many Irish priests do, I caressed the small figure of the impaled Christ. Suddenly Father John stood before me, his green eyes drinking me like a glass of ice water. He asked, "What would you do, lass, should you chance upon a man lying in the street, dying now, and there's no time to find him a priest to perform the sacrament of the last rite?"

His gaze held on to me a moment longer, then moved to other faces.

"He cannot speak." Father John walked toward the back of the room. We turned in our chairs. "Does this unfortunate man know Christ?"

No one answered. Father John smiled as though we were playing along perfectly, then raised his crucifix to his lips. "A kiss . . . is testimony enough. Absolution, children, follows such faith."

I eyed my new gold cross as it lay flat in my palm.

A five-inch crucifix is a difficult item to hide. "Lisa, take off that jacket. It's ninety degrees!" You can't tie a string around it and wear it under your blouse. "The paint's rubbing off!" You can't fit it in your shoe, and it falls out of your notebook onto the linoleum



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while your mother scrambles eggs. “Jesus, Lisa. Father doesn’t expect you to carry that thing everywhere you go!”

Mother finally yanked the cross from my hands—threw it away, hid it in the attic, I’m not sure. I rushed to school, too terrified to glance at the gutter, certain that I’d find Father John’s dying man lying there.

Turns out the imperiled man was actually three women and a child. The squeal of tires, the incongruous crunch of steel, and then that blessed last vestige of peace before chaos. Mother broke ice out of trays. Father grabbed blankets off our beds and shoved one in my arms as he shoved me out the back door toward the place of screaming. I planted my feet. Father moved on.

That day I learned that people face death differently: Some wail against death. Others whimper and twitch, making little more noise than does a trickle of blood down a forehead or out a nose. Still others pass unnoticed, like the little one who lay broken, undiscovered, between the front and back seats.

Father left the gate wide open, but I turned away, faced the white stucco wall of our garage. I didn’t carry the cross. I prayed.

*Hail Mary full of . . .* but words somehow failed this little Catholic girl. I closed my eyes against the wall’s expanse, squeezed my thoughts, my words, my soul, until finally, a first real prayer emerged like a single droplet of blood. “Dear God,” I trembled, “grace, please. I’m frightened.”

LISA TORCASSO DOWNING  
Heath, Texas

*“From angels bending near the earth to  
touch their harps of gold”*

CHRISTMAS WAS ONCE my favorite time of year—long, long ago when someone else did the holiday work. I do have some truly tender memories of Christmas, but they mostly make me frustrated at my inability to recreate for my own family the Christmas Eves I remember from my childhood: the candle-lit living room deepening the mood as the family sings carols and listens to Christmas stories, our reverent connection to each other and to the redeemed world unfolding anew.

Planning for a meaningful holiday was especially tough this year. I spent the week before Christmas across the country with our

oldest son and his wife (enjoying their new baby), then spent another day with my parents before returning home on Christmas Eve. When he picked me up from the airport, Bill warned me that he’d been reminding the kids that we were having a family Christmas Eve that evening and that some of the kids weren’t thrilled.

Oh, well, I thought, once they see we’re having a “real” Christmas Eve, they’ll warm up to the idea. Who could resist the cozy, spiritual Christmas Eve I was envisioning for them? I was still basking in appreciation and marveling that my Mom had saved (and shared with me during my visit) some of the notes from one of our family Christmas Eve programs when I was a teenager, complete with each family member’s scripture reading. I could feel the Christmas spirit oozing off those handwritten pages.

After an impromptu Christmas Eve dinner, we gathered for our family’s Christmas Eve. We were missing the candlelight and about half our family members, but we were together and would soon be singing and acting out yet another Christmas story. But then, as the first song began, one daughter sang a deliberate monotone. The

message was clear, "I don't wanna be doing this!"

The absurdity of my daughter opposing the ambience of our "real" Christmas Eve stopped me cold. I couldn't say another word or sing another song. Even after Bill read to the children from *Jesus the Christ* and they all went uneventfully to sleep, I couldn't move. I couldn't fill stockings or set out presents. I couldn't create any more of Christmas. Just couldn't.

Christmas morning dawned, and the kids woke up. But there was no Christmas to wake up to. Bill and I had been talking since about 4:00 a.m. At 7:00, we gathered the kids for a family meeting at which I told them how stupid I felt, but that I couldn't do Christmas without the Christmas Eve. I told them about my frustrations over not being able to give them the kind of meaningful Christmas Eves I'd known growing up and how I didn't feel I could give them presents after the ruined Christmas Eve. I felt really stupid—and selfish.

In response, the previous night's monotone-singing daughter announced, "Well, I didn't know it was supposed to be *meaningful*! I thought it was something we did just to be doing it!" She suggested we all watch a spiritual Christmas video and sing carols. The ensuing vote was unanimous. As we watched the video, the children reached out to each other for morning leg-tickles and back-scratches. Nobody complained. Nobody fought. Then the same daughter played carol after carol on the piano and shouted out the words to the less familiar

ones so the family could join in. Our fifteen-year-old son took turns shouting out upcoming words on the carols that were trickier to play.

It wasn't anything like my childhood Christmases, but in that living room, angels truly were bending near my earth.

LISA TENSMEYER HANSEN  
*Payson, Utah*

CHRISTMAS, 1982. THE five of us—Mom, my two sisters, my brother, and I—are together in the living room around a coffee table piled high with opened presents, including a lot of rain-related gear that has been prompted by my recent call to the Washington Seattle Mission. We are goofing on this and that, as easy together as I can ever remember us being.

They don't remember the often-mean, defeated Dan who had haunted this house just a year ago. They *really* don't.

DAN WOTHERSPOON  
*Tooele, Utah*

GROWING UP IN the Japanese countryside, I would often find myself face to face with the bodhisattva Jizō. Almost every day I passed little stone statues of Jizō next to flooded rice paddies, in cemeteries, off mountain paths, at crossroads. His bald head was often covered with moss or snow, but his serene smile always shone through his weather-beaten features. Sometimes I'd find that someone had knitted a bright red shawl or pink bonnet for him, or

had placed some toys and candy at his feet.

I heard stories about him as well. Standing at the threshold of nirvana, he looked back and saw the suffering of all living beings. He then vowed not to become a buddha until the multitude of hells was emptied and all former prisoners had achieved bliss ahead of him. Again and again, he descended into hell and freed humans from the most horrific torments imaginable, always offering his body to appease the demons.

When I have trouble envisioning the connection between my sins and Christ's suffering, I'm grateful for my encounters with Jizō.

JOHN DEWEY REMY  
*Irvine, California*



## GLIMPSE

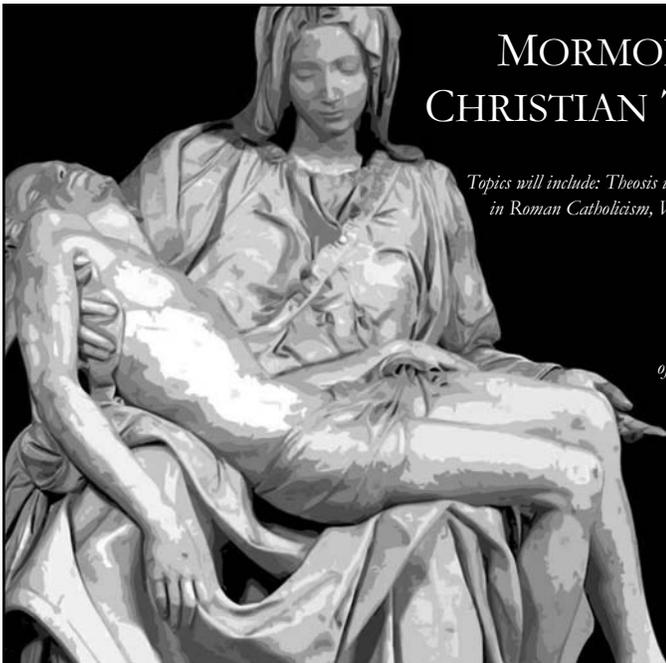
The trail curved out of black walnuts' flickering shade, led to creek bank, narrowed, dropped straight down. There, worn by coon, skunk, cat, it entered still water, mirror-clear and deep, speared by sunlight.

Particles pulsed in beams shot up from the sandy bottom until my eyes were starbursts, each flash a face from the album I'd quit imagining, the task grown too great.

Parents, friends, and pets death had put out. Others too: child staring through barbed wire, seated monk curling inward, having chosen flames, soldiers carrying a bag.

All on a journey revealed to me in a bead of time so bright my eyes were glass, fears seared. Then a fish passed, and calling from the woods a mourning dove.

—EDWARD BEATTY



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*For more information contact:*  
**DENNIS POTTER**  
*potterde@uvsc.edu*  
801.863.8817