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Holy Oil

Six months a widow, Helen sat with her son, Michael, in the ER. At age forty-seven, he'd had a mini-stroke: a gut-punch. Helen and her daughter-in-law, Susan, argued about who would stay the night with Michael.

"He needs his mother," Helen said, her skin heating up as it always did in Susan's presence.

After Susan countered that Michael needed his wife, Helen wanted to remind her of five years ago when she left for three months, just up and left with no explanation, abandoning Michael and their two kids, both under four at the time.

At home, Helen went into her bedroom and performed her daily ritual since her husband Vincent's death: She took the bottle of holy water from Lourdes by her bedside table, and touched a few drops of the water on her fingers, and made the sign of the cross on her body. She said three Hail Marys, the Lord's Prayer, and sent a special petition to St. Jude, patron of lost souls.

When Helen went to return the holy water to its place, she remembered she had some rarely used throat drops in her bedside table. Her throat felt scratchy. Next to the drops, she saw a forgotten vial of yellow oil in a zippered baggie beside a prayer card of Padre Pio. The card was dampened from the oil, unreadable. She had received it in the mail long ago, gratis from some organization to whom she'd given money. Padre Pio was the saint of stress-relief and, my Lord, how she could use that now. The top of the vial, crusted at the rim, needed pressure to open. The

oil had a bitter, woodsy scent. Helen poured a quarter-sized amount in her palm. She considered rubbing the oil on her hands, but most likely she'd need to go to the bathroom soon and didn't want to wash off the precious blessing the oil would bring like an answered prayer.

She rubbed the oil on her face, prayed to Padre Pio to relieve her stress, to heal Michael and keep Vincent safe in the afterlife. She believed it was good to reach out to a saint, digging deeper into the well of God's solace. But her face burned within moments of applying the oil; a dull heat amplified in waves into her cheeks, forehead, and eyelids.

Helen had beautiful skin and had never used more than Dial soap to clean it. She went to the sink, took the cracked cake of soap from the dish, rubbed it in her hands, lathered it under the water, and rubbed at her cheeks and forehead. She felt a burn as if she were scraping her skin with a scrub brush. She rubbed and rubbed until soap got in her eyes and she cried out.

The doctor, who met with her on a video call, said, "You really did a number on yourself, Helen."

He advised Benadryl and cold compresses, prescribed a cream.

"No more oils," the doctor said.

"Padre Pio was a saint," Helen said as if the doctor had insulted her friend.

The local pharmacy had delivery service, but it would take a while, so Helen sat with her face aflame, using Jergens for relief. It didn't work; her cheeks felt like warm pudding.

The young man from the pharmacy who handed over the package mumbled something Helen couldn't hear. He had to repeat himself four times, shouting so loud she had to step back. The words finally made themselves clear: "Bee sting?"

"A rash," she snapped and did not tip him as she'd planned.

Helen, betrayed by Padre Pio, turned to St. Jude in her duress. She had a candle embossed with his image. She sat on the bed and clasped the candle, prayed to the light, prayed against the pull of her vanity. Still, she could not keep away from the mirror, a little handheld she put by the bed and carried in the storage compartment in her walker.

She wondered how such a small amount of thin oil could do such damage. The skin felt tight as if it were attached to strings that someone pulled from behind her head. The burn, though dull, persisted. As the skin scabbed, it looked like the crust of cooked lamb, a touch more red than brown.

Since Vincent's death, Michael brought Helen groceries each Tuesday; her hip hurt too much to drive for long distances; the nearest store was ten miles away. Once Michael returned from the ER, the doctor didn't want him driving for a week, so Susan brought the groceries.

Helen wanted to call Susan and tell her to leave the bags out front. She wasn't feeling well, she'd say. But Helen felt a rebellion rise up, strong as her resentment, calcified these last five years. She wanted Susan to see what suffering looked like.

Helen opened the door. Susan didn't flinch at the sight of her face.

She asked what happened.

“It’s Padre Pio’s fault,” Helen said. She gestured toward the kitchen where Susan set down the bags.

Susan stood there, not with a pitying look as Helen expected, but one of curiosity.

Helen stared at the wall behind Susan’s head, focused on the picture of Michael and Annie, her oldest.

Susan sighed, shook her head slightly. “I’ll be back tomorrow,” she said.

Susan arrived just after lunch the following day. “I made this,” she said, taking out of a plastic bag an object that looked like a sausage-shaped wad of pantyhose.

“You put it on your face,” Susan said. “It’s herbs and essential oils.”

Just as Helen believed in the virtue of angels and saints, the gentle hand of a generous God, Susan believed in the healing power of herbs and berries, stones and crystals. She swore by the magic of fairies (seriously). Vitamins and supplements covered her kitchen counter, yet another example of her house’s unmanaged clutter.

The cream the doctor prescribed had given Helen some relief, but she could use it only once a day, and her face itched terribly, a protracted burn.

“C’mon,” Susan said, handing Helen the greasy stocking. “Give it a try.”

“The doctor sent the cream,” Helen insisted, though she was curious about the herbs and oils.

Susan sighed, shook her head. “I’m going to leave this here. I’ll come back tomorrow.” Standing at the open door, she said, “You really should try it, Helen.”

It would be giving in, Helen knew, absolving Susan of her sin.

Over her years of struggle with Susan, Helen often asked Father Al what she should do.

“I can’t forgive her,” Helen confessed, twisting a tissue in her hands. “I can’t get past it.”

“Yes, you can,” Father Al said, nodding. “You are a faithful woman.”

Yet her feelings wouldn’t turn. No matter how much time she spent at the pew on her knees, her faith had no legs. Susan only reminded her of all she lacked.

In Helen’s kitchen two days later, Susan heated water in the tea kettle for herself.

“Have a seat,” she told Helen. I’ll make you some coffee.”

Coffee is exactly what Helen wanted, but not from Susan’s hand.

“I’ll make it myself,” Helen said, moving in front of Susan before she could get to the coffee maker.

The two sat at the kitchen table, a plate of Lorna Doones between them. Susan took one of the teabags from the box she brought over; the minty scent filled the room, reminding Helen of last Easter when she criticized Susan’s store-bought cake.

“I want to ask you something, and I don’t want you to be mad,” Susan said, breaking a Lorna Doone in half.

For God’s sake. “I won’t promise anything, but try me.”

“How long is it going to take for you to forgive me?”

“For—?”

“For leaving, Helen,” she said, shaking her head impatiently. “For leaving.”

Helen touched her hot coffee cup. “Why did you leave?”

“I needed… I was young when I had Brownwyn. Only twenty. I needed… I don’t know what I needed, only that it was something different from what I had.”

“You didn’t have to shack up with some other guy.”

Her brow wrinkled. “I didn’t have an affair. Who told you that?”

Helen poured cream in her coffee, watched it swirl in the dark liquid. “No one. I just know.”

“I love Michael. I always have. I’ve never been unfaithful to him, Helen.”

Helen touched her cheek; pain rose up like a flame.

“Well, he’s been faithful to you, I know that. Even after you left.”

“I wonder if you’ll ever be able to forgive me,” Susan said. “I’m really trying.”

Helen remembered Marjorie Spellman crossing the church parking lot to tell her she saw Vincent with another woman in a booth at Rosina’s.

“Around one o’clock,” she said, her lips in a tight line. “Last Friday.”

Helen didn’t once consider leaving Vincent, not even packing a bag and staying at her sister’s house overnight in Jersey City. You stood beside the commitment you made at the altar. Vincent was probably treating his secretary to lunch anyway, a harmless gesture of gratitude.

Helen drank her coffee and Susan her tea in silence. Helen’s face still burned so terribly her eyes watered.

“You should try the poultice,” Susan said. “Try it, Helen.”

Her look was so mournful Helen understood that Susan was asking for forgiveness. Helen’s heart, scorched as richly as her skin, would not give it to her.

The grassy smell of oil and bitter herbs clotted on Helen’s fingers as she pulled apart the stocking. Her face flared with anxiety and fear. What if Susan was tricking her, selecting oils and herbs to melt her skin?

Her face felt singed as if she stood beside a flame. Desperate, she took a clump of the oily concoction, smeared its wet heft on her cheeks, forehead, eyelids. She expected the burn to intensify, but all she felt was a coolness, a reprieve. She looked at herself in the mirror, the greasy who-knows-what staining her cheeks. She looked like a swamp creature.

Feeling like an idiot, she washed off the grime, cursing herself for trying it in the first place. In the mirror, she saw her eyelids were no longer swollen; her cheeks blushed as if nipped by winter's chill. Her chin tingled. She turned off the bathroom light. In the mirror's reflection, her skin seemed to glow in the darkness, luminous as angels.

"I'm sorry," she whispered in the aura of that awesome light. "Forgive me."