

I DREAMED OF OIL

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I don't know who was sick. Maybe it was you. Let's say it was.

You were sick and I was probably more worried than you (as per usual) but we brought our faith to our prayers and we pled that you would be healed. I anointed your head with oil. And I sealed that anointing and blessed you.

This was the last of our oil.

And you were healed.

Later, I was not there, but later you were telling this story to an apostle. And the apostle took a container of oil about six inches high and of curious workmanship—blown glass, clearly, but into such an astonishing shape it appeared the oil was twisting into the air like God in his pillar—and he blessed that oil and gave it to you.

Now, there is nothing in my theology (and, I believe, nothing in yours) that would lead us to believe that oil blessed by an apostle is any holier than oil blessed by, say, me, but you and I couldn't help but marvel at the container and its holy oil, a twinge of celebrity worship infecting our religious feeling. And then, somehow, and we have never quite been able to work out how this happened, but somehow the container was uncapped and tipped over and pouring its entire contents upon my body.

No point in collecting the oil, trying to put it back in the container. Your apostle-blessed oil is gone. Or, rather, it's soaking through my clothing and coating my skin. I feel bad. You feel bad. We sorrow that the oil is lost. Because, even though we do not believe it is holier than any other blessed oil, we imagine that telling of its origins might give hope to the next sick person we love as they receive a blessing.

But we are wrong. I don't know how much of what we believe to be true we are mistaken about, but certainly we are wrong about the relative holiness of blessed oils. Because I am changed. I don't feel any different, but I pick up a colicky baby and it calms. I ruffle the hair of a snot-nosed second grader and his sinuses dry. When you scratch your arm upon a thumbtack sticking strangely from a doorjamb and I take your hand, you are healed.

The oil has somehow entered me and made me holy. I can heal others with a touch.

I do not know what to do. Do I have an obligation like a Saturday-morning superhero to seek hospitals and campsites under overpasses and reach out my hand? Surely not. I am not the Christ. I am just me. I never go anywhere. I am too shy to speak to the downtrodden. Sometimes I do not say hello to friends when I see them at the other end of a supermarket aisle.

Then again, at baptism, did I not take upon myself his holy name? Did I not pledge to mourn with those who mourn and to act as he would act?

Who am I, now that an apostle has indirectly made me holy? What am I to do?

And then I realize. That while these small miracles have impressed me, they have not changed my faith. I do not believe I can enter a tent city and touch a man with the palsy then invite him to stand and walk. I do not believe I can pass through an ER waiting room and invite all present to shake my hand and return to their homes.

My faith is in a limited God. And I am ashamed. I am happy to heal my family and my friends and my fellow Saints—the ones I know. The story of my gift has spread through these circles, and people do come to me for small things—a twisted ankle, a scuffed knee, prom-night acne—but you and I have spoken and we both hope, though we wish we did not, that those who will get cancer choose their doctor and not seek me. Who am I to heal the truly sick? If I say yes, and thus burn through my faith, will I also burn through theirs?

I awake. The image of that strange bottle is clear in my mind. I am aware of the oil spilled upon me. I know that I am become holy.

But now—I fill in the gaps of my dream with mortal imagination. And I sit in my bed. And what should I do, now that I see that I am holy?

First, let me turn to you and let me kiss you with my holy lips. Let me touch your cheek with my holy hand. Let me wake you from your dream—and hear of it. Yours may matter too. Or be the key to mine. Or be a beautiful shadow you have already forgotten.

I do not know the implications of one oil being holier than another. But I have always known the implications of you sleeping beside me. Now, to you, let me surrender all the holiness I have until you, too, are holy.

Already I feel more certain. I realize no burden is shouldered alone.

Soon, we will rise and shower and go forth. Perhaps we will touch others as we make our way. And perhaps our touch will heal. If so, all glory be to God.

What need we to understand?

THERIC JEPSON {thmazing.com} is the author of *Byuck* and *Just Julie's Fine*. Although dreams do not play a significant role in either novel, if you read them, your own dreams will be so great. So great.