

## **Just Like That** | Renee James

When gratitude leads to mercy.

The mattress yields as I settle in for the night. My two-year-old climbs into my lap, and my arms curve around him. I shift to bring him closer, breathing in the silence of the moment. Closing my eyes, I breathe out the soggy diaper changes, toddler meltdowns, deadlines, and unfinished to-do list of this just-ended day.

"Christopher, it's altar time," I whisper. "Hmm," he agrees sleepily. "Dear God," I continue. "Thank you for this day."

And just like that, crumpled bed sheets become an altar, and Christopher and I are doing examen—offering Jesus the day that's been and speaking out our thanks into the night darkness as if our lives depended on it. They do.

### **We Belong to God**

St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), who founded the Jesuit order, developed the examen, a technique of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God's presence. Ignatius believed that the key to healthy spirituality was to find God in all things, and that praying the examen daily would allow people to hear God in their hearts and enable them to discern God's will in their lives. Giving thanks lies at the heart of examen.

The simplicity of this way of praying pulls me in. You do it anywhere, anytime, even on ruffled bed sheets with the lights out, the comforter drawn up close, your child in your arms, and sleep just a phrase away. The wonder of the prayer for me, though, lies in that moment between "Christopher, it's altar time" and "Dear God." In that moment I realize that God is present, and his Spirit waits to guide me in remembering the day with all its good and bad and to receive my thanks.

"Thank you, God, for Christopher," I begin, as I always do.

"Hmm," Christopher sighs in agreement.

"Thanks for your peace. I felt it in my office today while I worked."

"Mmm." Christopher's eyelids flutter and then close. His breathing quiets.

"Help me to be patient with Jeff's job transition. Doesn't he realize we need income? I want to kick and scream at him and at you. But I know that you know what we need. Everything under heaven and on earth belongs to you. You multiplied loaves and fish. So help me to release Jeff into your care. He belongs to you. Christopher and I belong to you. I'm so grateful for that." Christopher's right leg twitches once and is still.

## **The Miracle of Release**

The quiet drapes around my shoulders, familiar and warm. My back curves as if I'm kneeling at the altar rails in church. I realize right then that a small miracle has happened over the months of praying our thanks every night. It's the miracle of mercy.

I don't do mercy well—especially when my family doesn't follow the directions I've laid out for them. But slowly, through practicing gratitude every night, I've become more merciful and patient.

For instance, I've never understood how my husband, Jeff, couldn't successfully move his business from niche to mainstream. (How hard could this be for one able-bodied man who's got everything going?) So I'd written out countless business plans for him. Every day I'd forced us to discuss timelines and cash flow. I'd gained 50 pounds because of my desperation and panic when the recession dried up product orders. I'd wearied out our marriage with my "Or else ... " ultimatums.

Now 900 prayers of thanks later, the miracle is this: With thanks, I eagerly release Jeff and his business, our son, Christopher, and all that I think we need to survive, into the gentle hands of Christ. With thanks, I receive the energy to wait one more day—possibly more—for our efforts to bear fruit. With thanks, I receive God's gifts of mercy to me—a certainty deep in my belly that he delights over me and that he waits with me.

"I'm able to relax," I murmur into the sweet darkness.

I wonder what other miracles await as I continue to pray my thanks.

"Lord, your ways are not my ways and your thoughts are not my thoughts," I speak out over my sleeping baby. "Thanks."