

The Vigil (Katherine Johnson)

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I open a small bottle, plug the top with my thumb, tilt it back, just a bit, until mercy runs down my hand. And I trace a fragrant cross of blessed oil on a brow burning fever. Shut my eyes and whisper Martha-Mary words, “**The one You love is sick.**”

Little boy weeps sleepy, points to the wall. And I take down an icon, the one of God clothed in this broken body. And He and I, we keep an all-night vigil at a child’s bedside.



The clock counts this late hour and I measure medicine, pour it into a small cup, sign it with a cross. I place it in his hands, young eyes looking up at me, all bloodshot and heavy. He hands it back, whispers, “Scratch mine back, Mommy?”

Mine back. That’s how he says it. And I rub that small, soft back, so hot to the touch, loving the imperfection of his asking. This child, he asks from the heart and he receives.

He hasn't yet learned to stop the asking and he doesn't mind his fumbling over words. And in this quiet dark, his words weigh down a room with grace. Because he's teaching me, this little one who hasn't learned to sin by relying on himself. He still knows that he needs and he asks without hesitating.

And I've long forgotten. Forgotten that I'm needy. Always forgetting to ask. Never wanting to ask help from others. And I'm wondering how those who can't rely humble on neighbor can ever rely whole on God.

And that's really the thing I'm always forgetting. That He makes up what's lacking, even when my asking is imperfect, whether I have the right words or not.

I sit there all quiet beside him, one hand rubbing gentle caresses, another with a small book holding my prayers for this child. *O Lord, we are not worthy of Thy entry under our roof; but speak only Thy word, and this child will be healed.*

A fit of coughing soon wakes him and he asks, this time for a drink. I point to a small bottle, living waters, holy and blessed. And he nods yes, "That one. Yes."

He drinks grace because he knows how to ask. He knows what to ask for.

Clock hands wave me back to time and I look into the face of control and all the well-laid plans. The sleep I'm not getting and the plans that now need canceling and I don't care because this is one of those gentle reminders that there's nothing I control. Reminder that the only thing to really do right is to need deeply. Learn to ask.

This spiritual school of illness, all the ache, and pain, and pull on the heart. In this life we have to learn to die to live. And some of us, we learn to die best by being sick, feeling weak. Because living by our own strength blinds us to our true need. When the body ails our spiritual sight's restored.

Jesus said it's not the healthy who need the Physician, but the sick. The healthy are the ones always forgetting that they're needy. It's during these times, when strength fails and body aches. Mama watching baby toss sleep and sick. That's when you begin to learn what it means to *need*. And it's then that we're reminded of Martha-Mary lessons, the one thing *need-ful*.

That the real need is God and He's the only One to fill it.

I turn away from the light of the clock, turn back to the darkness, the One you can feel, blind woman begging help for all those things I need. Ask Him to help me care

for this child, relinquish the control and learn to trust. **Because it's in accepting my weakness that His power's made perfect.** And He's glorified in my need.

So I take those needs, sigh prayers for healing. And in the grace of the vigil, I learn to ask.

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