

The Three Jesuses
by Robert Locke

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It is a completely unimportant story, but I must tell it because it is rich with ironies and dies with me otherwise. It is the story of the three Jesuses.

Many times during my mother's life I heard her tell the story of the last night on the planet of her sister's mother-in-law, whose name I don't even know. I guess it was Mrs. Hubins since her son, my aunt's husband, was Uncle Bud Hubins, a man I never liked much, a man who wasn't married to my aunt for very many years, a man who was a bit ridiculous in many ways, for example signing my empty 8th grade autograph book and telling me proudly and seriously that that name might be the name of the President one day. That did not become the case, of course, and even in 8th grade I knew it would never be.

But all of that is completely unimportant to the story of the three Jesuses, merely establishing what would become a rich irony for me: a son's choosing not to be at his mother's side during her final moments. My mother was there with Mrs. Hubins, however, and she retold many times through the years the story of the last words of Mrs. Hubins.

"Jesus is coming tonight," Mrs. Hubins said to her early in the evening. My mother's inflection every time she repeated this was

exactly the same. "Jesus is coming tonight," she would say sweetly, fondly, with a profundity that was endless and timeless.

And then with her very last breath, Mrs. Hubins looked upwards and said, "I'm coming, Lord." Again it was that inflection in my mother's retelling, as though Mrs. Hubins were saying, "Please be patient with me, Lord; I'm on my way, and everything is lovely."

Who could not believe, then, hearing that story retold so often, so faithfully, that my mother would not take solace from it? And who could not believe, then, that it was exactly the right thing for me to say when I thought my mother was facing her own last day on the planet? I held her hand and said quietly, achieving that same inflection, "Jesus is coming today, Mom."

My mother turned to me and said, "What?!?" as though to say, "Are you nuts?!?"

Well, and indeed how nuts is it for a guy who is probably an atheist to say such a thing to his mom while she lies on her deathbed struggling for every last breath? In defense of that guy, completely ignorant about death and dying, I can say that he was trying to give her what comfort he might, in whatever way that he might. That is why I had dredged every last brain cell for weeks to bring up every lyric of every Christian hymn I had learned throughout my life, to bring my mother comfort. This

Saturday, which I believed to be her last day on the planet, I was singing through tears and choking, but I did manage to continue singing.

Still, I admit that “Jesus is coming today, Mom,” is a pretty grim thing to say to a woman struggling for every last breath.

I didn't have a lot of time on that Saturday, however, to ponder the propriety or impropriety of saying such a thing because the family started arriving. Indeed, the second Jesus walked through the front door only a couple of hours later.

My sister Janet had been on the telephone that morning telling everyone that this was my mother's last day. I had wanted this last day to be peaceful and full of hymns, but Janet always loved drama and, unbeknownst to me, had called everyone to say—no doubt in her most dramatic tones—“If you want to see Mom alive, you'd better get here fast,” click. That was Janet's style.

But this, too, is only of sideline importance to the story of the three Jesuses. It merely sets the scene, the entire family coming through the front door a few at a time to gather in the living room—raucous out there, really, as I remember so hideously—some choosing and some not choosing to come into my mother's bedroom to say goodbye. Mom actually rallied at so many sudden visitors.

And meanwhile through the front door came the second Jesus.

Or at least Jesus is the name that he gave me on that day. He pronounced it in the Spanish way, Hey-Seuss, but that did not alter my stun. Never before had I ever spoken the words, "Jesus is coming today, Mom," and never before had a Jesus walked through the front door.

I have since learned that this Jesus was somebody's fiance, new to the family. Usually he called himself Mike, I have learned. But certainly on that Saturday, he introduced himself as Jesus. And certainly he was one of the visitors who chose to come into my mother's bedroom even though he had never met her. I don't know if he introduced himself to her as Jesus. In fact I don't know if any words passed between them at all.

But what is important to this story of the three Jesuses is that this Jesus paused on his way out of my mom's bedroom to look intently at the picture of Jesus that hung right outside her bedroom door. I had hung that picture there simply because there was already a nail in the wall right there, typical of me. I have no sense of decoration, either home decoration or body decoration. My niece Charlotte, years before, had brought my mom this picture of Jesus, and I looked for a place to hang it and saw this nail.

I didn't know until this day when the second Jesus paused to admire the third Jesus—the one hanging on the wall—that my mom did not like that picture. She felt, I began to understand as I now tried to

unravel her thoughts, that it is unChristian to have a depiction of Christ on the wall, rather like the graven idols Jesus forbade.

So it is one of the many ironies of the story of the three Jesuses, this unwanted Jesus hanging on the wall just outside my mother's bedroom door. I had always considered it to be a talisman as, night after night when she would wake so lost, she would finally see this picture of Jesus in the glow of the night light from the next room. What I eventually discovered, however, is that it was not the picture of Jesus that my mother would first recognize; it was the wooden Viking ship hanging on the wall beside this picture of Jesus. This Viking ship was the ugliest piece of artwork I have ever seen, abandoned on that wall by the previous owner of the house and—typical of me—never removed. I had never found anything the right size or shape to replace it.

So this pagan Viking ship, hanging beside this Jesus, would be what would orient my mother to her surroundings and give her peace again in her bed. Then she would call me and I would come in and help her to the potty chair, and she would tell me how she had awakened so full of fear but then had seen the Viking ship and found peace again. And I would add, not knowing that she disapproved of it, that there was also the picture of Jesus watching over her.

So now on this Saturday when I finally discovered how she disapproved of the picture of Jesus—just before I took it off the wall to

keep it from being stolen by the second Jesus—I understood in a new way the depth of her love for the real Jesus. On her last day on the planet, she wanted to protect Him.

And I guess I understood in a new way my own inadequacy. But that, too, is unimportant to the story of the three Jesuses, a mere ironic artifact.

My mom was paranoid during the last weeks of her life, afraid even of me at times. I did not really believe that the second Jesus would try to steal that third Jesus, the depiction of her real Jesus. But I always did whatever my mom wanted, and so I took down the picture and hid it. It was only after her death that I came across it again and, not knowing what else to do with it and wanting to get it out of the way, I rehung it on that same nail. I left it there with the Viking ship when I sold the house.

And I write this, all of this, why? Well, because it's nifty with ironies. And love. And it all dies with me otherwise.

The End