

The Flavor Of Faith

By Diane Rosier Miles

Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” John 6: 35

Marian could chart the phases of her grief by looking back at checkbook stubs. She'd somehow paid the mortgage every month, even while nearly smothered with pain and loss. Then came deposits for his life insurance, which she'd scribbled in a hand held up by kind accountant friends. They'd been so patient while she gathered her mind into a pile of tiny shards. Next, she saw expenses for those self-help books, the manuals for the living dead, the survivors who want to be buried but can't.

Marian paced the carpet in her office at home. She was attempting to add up her life. Great waves of paper splashed all over her little writing desk. No telling what important message lay buried in its depths. Endless hours of struggling to stay afloat had made her bitter and tired. If she could just sit down in a small, very quiet, circle, she might be safe from the swirling storms around her.

What am I supposed to do? she thought. Paul's favorite print, Rembrandt's Christ in a Storm on the Sea of Galilee, hung at eye level near her desk. The metaphor for crisis was unmistakable. This was the biggest shipwreck of her life. The keel had split, the mast had fallen, and Marian was flung into salty, churning waters. She stared at the print and looked for sharks. She knew that they were there, pretending to be gold fish.

The only perfect husband in the world had died at 47 in May. It was October and Marian's spirit still stood numbly in emergency room shadows. Tubes had flushed and needles gushed, and then her husband simply went away. Some unseen, invisible interloper had led her love into the night. She was standing right there looking at him, but they said that he had gone.

"Paul's had a bleeding event in his brain," the pretty doctor said. She cupped Marian under her elbows, holding the new widow upright. She was trying very hard to be compassionate. As if in response to an unspoken cue, all of the nurses looked at the floor. It was the only thing they could think of to do. "I know this was unexpected. I want you to take a deep breath," the doctor said. "Look at me. Now breathe."

"Was it a stroke? I mean, was it a stroke?" In her shock, Marian repeated herself.

"I can't call it that right now."

"But we were playing cards. He got a headache. He said it would pass." An urge to black out seized her. Someone should have made the room stop turning.

"It happens like this frequently. It's often very sudden."

Marian became aware of a violent sobbing around her waist. How long had that been going on? Why was the ceiling spinning? She reached out and encircled her son, Jimmy, in her arms. He pushed himself free to take her face in his hands.

“Is my daddy going to be OK? Is daddy all right, mom? When is daddy coming home? God wouldn’t take my daddy,” the child was crying. Moments later, with a gasp of understanding, Jimmy’s jagged screams pierced the marrow in Marian’s bones.

Now she sat at her desk in her unnaturally quiet home, straining to calculate taxes. She despised math. It was just one more source of brain damage. Funny, how she could bake away the fractions in almost any recipe. An eighth of this, a fourth of that. Those irksome little measurements melted away like fine, European butter. She had wanted only to count birthdays, anniversaries, and family vacations. But she couldn’t count on anything, not anymore.

Outside her tear-stained window, yellow and crimson leaves twirled in a light free fall to her driveway. “Autumn in Pennsylvania on my own,” Marian mused. “I’ll care for the car and shovel snow. It’s going to be a hard winter. I’ll have the heater inspected. We’ll get the fireplace cleaned.”

She was startled from her thoughts by the crash of metal meeting oak. “Donna, are you all right?” she called, rushing from her office. It sounded as if the housekeeper had fallen down the wooden stairs that led to the kitchen. Marian had complained to Paul a million times to carpet that treacherous stairway.

“Don’t worry about it, Marian,” Donna said. She stood up and rubbed her elbows. “The vacuum took the worst of it, not me. I wish I’d never seen the infomercial about that machine. It’s useless! I better find something else to do at six in the morning.”

Marian moved to help her young friend, extending her hand to give her a lift. “It’s not the moment I’d planned to say this, Donna, but at least you won’t have to brave the stairs anymore. I don’t have Paul’s salary now, and I can’t afford to keep you. I was just going over the bills.”

The two looked at each other with doubts in their eyes. In theory, one worked for the other, but their friendship blurred the line between employer and staff. In a moment, Donna spoke up.

“Why don’t you take a few days to figure it out? God will provide a way for us to stay together. I’m a person who hopes.”

Marian was touched by the girl’s dedication. But clearly she didn’t know how expensive everything is. “Listen, you need to take care of yourself,” she told Donna. “You’ve got a long life ahead. Make some good financial plans.” She wanted to add, “And don’t end up like me. Middle-aged and broke”. Marian had always enjoyed her job as a pastry chef, but in the end she’d depended on Paul’s income. Now, even his life insurance might not keep her from financial danger.

“God knows I have expenses,” Donna replied. “I’ve been praying about you and Jim, and, sure, my rent. He showed me it’s going to work out. I have a sign from him.”

“What do you mean, ‘you have a sign’?” That seemed like quite a stretch to Marian. She could’ve used a miracle in May, but one never came.

“My rash is gone.” With that unusual declaration, Donna picked up the vacuum and returned to the stairs. Hers was a practical faith that God would provide what is needed. She gave her problems to him every morning while she brushed her teeth, then she went back to work. Simple.

Marian peered into space for a second to study the problem of a beautiful, loyal girl with mysterious blotches. It was all a little too untidy for her conservative tastes. Couldn't God have chosen a more delicate sign? She followed Donna to the staircase. “Your rash is gone, so I'm going to survive?” Marian asked. “Maybe you could just give me a hint?”

“It's not the rash, it's the prayer. I had a rash all over my hands. It kept getting worse. Yesterday I asked God how I could be a good housekeeper for you with hands like that. I knew you wouldn't like it when you found out. It would put you in a spot, you know, having to choose to keep me, warts and all, or hire somebody else.”

“Well, Donna, I don't know what to say. I guess maybe a dermatologist”

“So I got up this morning and my rash is gone. See, take a look.” She held up her hands to show Marian their purity, as if it was indisputable proof of divine intervention, not possibly the result of a good antibiotic ointment from the corner drugstore.

“That's pretty impressive, but I wouldn't base a career on it, Donna.” Marian chose her words carefully. This was, after all, somebody she liked a lot. “Maybe it was a twenty-four-hour thing. Just cleared up by itself.”

Donna smiled. “I have a twenty-four-hour God. That rash looked like a plague. It had been there a month. My heart tells me I’m supposed to work for you. Add up your bills again.”

The women were in the kitchen one day when Donna made an announcement. She had an exciting proclamation. She stopped just short of waving her hands in the air. “I want to tell you about the man I’m going to marry,” she said.

Here we go again, Marian thought. She looked up from the pie dough she was crimping. She was becoming accustomed to Donna’s revelations, but every once in a while one of them still made her wonder. This news had the feel of grand tidings.

“I’m going to marry the man who brings me a river.”

Marian raised an eyebrow. “So you’re waiting for an engineer?”

“I don’t know what kind of a job he has, but I had a dream. A tall man with dark features was standing by a river, and he said he was coming for me. He was holding a bowl of water. He held it out to me. What do you think he meant?”

“That was somehow a good omen to you? I would’ve been afraid that he was,” Marian paused, “just part of my imagination. Or maybe he symbolized that you’re going to drown in some way, go under somehow.” She thought of Donna’s imperiled finances, uncertain as they were because of her own predicaments.

“Marian, I have never seen a person worry as much as you do. You have too many fears. Stop worrying about that chimney. It’s not going to catch on fire.”

Marian turned to face Donna. This had been a recurrent nightmare of hers, but she'd not told anyone. "How did you know I was concerned about the fireplace?"

"The Lord told me."

Now this sort of behavior was finally getting to be too much, Marian decided. It was one thing to have a quiet faith, but it was another to claim to hear from God. What if Jimmy overheard such a statement? Marian's temper ignited.

"Some people would say I have a lot to worry about. I just lost my husband and I have a young son to raise by myself. I'm not as secure as I'd hoped. I'll be alone for the rest of my life. Many people would say I have a right to be afraid." Marian was surprised by the anger that poured from her mouth. She knew she was hurting her friend.

"You're not alone, and you don't need to be afraid anymore."

"Who are you to say that?"

"I don't say it. God says it."

"Your God sent me nothing but pain," Marian said, rancor rising in her throat. "I look in the mirror and I see only decay. My son cries every night in his sleep. Where was your God when they rolled my husband down to the morgue?" Marian felt sorrow settle on her like a large black crow. Its long claws dug deep into her flesh. She hung her head and wept.

"Mommy, please don't cry," Jimmy said. He'd been playing trains on the family room rug. Hearing his mother's sobs, he came in to check on her. Pools of trauma floated heavily under his five-year-old eyes. "Please don't cry anymore."

“See what you’ve done,” Marian snapped. She had been cautious to ensure that Jimmy would never see her cry. It angered her that she’d lost her composure. “What does a woman like you know about life? Who would marry you? You don’t have any idea what I endure. Don’t ever speak to me about God again, especially in front of my son.”

Donna looked down at her hands, smooth and white. She knew that God had intervened in her life, and she wanted her friend to know him, too.

“God will speak for himself. He doesn’t need me to talk for him. You’re right, I clean houses to pay my rent. I don’t know a lot or own very much. But I believe in my spirit that God’s calling you,” Donna said. “I don’t know why he chose this way.” She gathered up her cleaning supplies and went home.

Marian leaned on her cold kitchen counter while her mantle clock chimed and chimed again. The countertop’s clammy granite and decorative edge reminded her of a tombstone. She stood, lost in thought, for a very long time. Jimmy clung tightly to her waist. Rows and rows of Paul’s favorite pies stood waiting to be baked. Their ripe, mouthwatering aroma would soon fill the house. “Cherry comfort” he’d called them. “Let’s take a nap, Jimmy,” she said.

When the child was sleeping soundly, his plump teddy tucked in his arms, Marian returned to the kitchen and silently threw out each and every pie. She finally knew, deeply and irrevocably, there was no help for her in the past. “Are you here, God?” she

asked. "Are you here? Please listen to me if you are. I don't have the strength to ask one more time. I don't know how to go on with my life."

The minutes ticked by and no Red Sea was parted. No clap of thunder was heard. With a dead weight where her heart had once been, Marian returned to her hateful desk to once again confront the month's budget. She surveyed the letters and pamphlets and bills, and with a burst of unchecked fury she swept them all to the carpet. Heaving with tears, she moaned in her hands.

Then, a little stack of papers fell into her lap. They landed with a soft sound. Marian looked up wearily, imagining that some pile of clutter had escaped her furious sweep. What she saw reminded her instead of the earliest days of her marriage.

"I remember these," Marian said. "I was jealous for so long that Paul saved these letters from his mother." She slowly leafed through the beautiful linen papers. *You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*, she read in lovely lettering on one of the pages.

Oh, ouch. A painful memory surfaced. She recalled a term her mother-in-law had applied to her that worried Paul. "What was it? Ah, 'unbeliever,'" Marian said. For a moment, she considered disposing of all the letters.

Dear Son, the letter on top of the stack began. *I want you to know that I pray for Marian*. "Well, all right," Marian said. "I guess that's an honorable thing. I shouldn't be offended that the woman felt a need to pray for me." *Someday she'll need God's strength*.

Marian dropped the letters. The words resonated with her in a special way. Where had these letters been, all of these years, that she'd never seen them in the desk? She read with appreciation page after page on which Paul's mother expressed her faith in a loving, living God. *What is it that makes these people believe?* she thought.

The next morning, while she stood in the mist of a steaming shower, Marian reached out her hand and wiped a long, wide question mark on the shower stall. The glistening water from the showerhead soon rinsed the figure away, but her uneasiness remained. *I want to know more*, she thought. *I want to understand*. She rushed to dress herself and braved something she'd never dared before. She walked briskly to the bookstore at the nearby mall and bought a New Testament.

"You want that Bible in a box?" the salesgirl asked. She was a curious collection of tattoos and red string on her wrist. Dressed entirely in black, she looked at Marian through heavily made up eyes.

Marian was immediately annoyed. Did she have to say "Bible" in front of the entire store? Couldn't she have time to think about Christianity in private, first? "No, just in the bag will be fine," she said.

"You want a gift receipt with that Bible?"

"No, please, just put it in the plastic bag for me. Thanks."

“You can apply that Bible to our new discount card. You want to put it on the discount card?”

Somebody snickered behind her in line. There was shuffling of impatient feet.

“No. I don’t come in here very often. Now, if you’ll please just put my book in the bag, I’ll be going.”

“Here,” the girl said with a grimace, “enjoy your Bible.”

Marian took the leather-bound copy into her kitchen and laid it on the island like an odd curiosity. It had all the familiarity of a moon rock. Finally, holding the book as if she weren’t sure what would jump out, she sat down and began to read. The words had a sort of fragrance to them. Marian began to hear the voice of God.

“What you reading, mommy?” Jimmy asked. He was always walking in undetected, quiet as smoke. Was the kid part Indian guide?

“A new book,” she said.

“Is that the one with the gold letters on it?”

“Yes.”

“I saw that book before. It’s the angel book.”

“How do you know?”

“Daddy showed me one just like it a long time ago. He read me the story about the angels who go to see a man named Jesse when he woke up in a cave. The man didn’t like the big rock in front of his door.”

Marian thought about that for a minute and came up with the resurrection story. She had just read the account herself. “I believe his name was Jesus,” Marian said.

“That’s the guy,” Jimmy said. “Got any bananas?” For the first time in many weeks, the boy looked at her and smiled.

Marian gathered the child up onto her lap, and together they read in red letters the words of Jesus Christ. Marian noticed how eagerly Jimmy listened to the stories, and how he took as a matter of fact the lessons they taught. According to Jimmy, if Jesus walked on the water, it must have been for a good reason. If God said that Jesus fed a great crowd with a few fishes and loaves, it must have been a true story.

The little boy had only one question, and the expression of it took Marian’s breath. She had been dreading it for months, for she knew one day it would unroll itself like a shroud.

“Why did God take our daddy away?” Jimmy flipped through the pages of the New Testament as if searching for a clear reason there. His little blonde cowlick bobbed up and down while he turned from page to page. Then, not finding what he needed to know, he turned his blue eyes and long lashes to his mother for help.

Marian knew she would spend the rest of her life trying to answer his question. She felt she had a moral right to know, a right to be told by someone in authority why she had been deprived so mysteriously of her husband's smile and love. She *demand*ed to know why. Was she not a thinking creature who could be reasoned with?

Gazing down on his inquisitive face, Marian had fresh pity for Jimmy. She vowed she would help him to once again make sense of his world, to heal, and to find joy in being alive. She would try her best to subdue her own writhing pain in order that Jimmy might fully recover. She would help her son to answer his questions and to survive.

To Marian's great chagrin, however, his nightmares only worsened. She was jolted one night from her own troubled sleep by a scream that jerked her upright in bed. She thought at first it was the plaintive cry of the nor'easter that roared through her town. When she had gone to bed, the storm was hurling icy needles at her house and threatening all of her lights. Jimmy's sad cries for comfort were yet one more manifestation of the tempests that raged without and within.

"Mama!" Jimmy called with a frantic note. "I need you! I had a bad dream!"

Marian flung on her robe in her bedroom downstairs and hurried to the steps in the kitchen. They would take her up to Jimmy's second-floor room. "I'm coming, son! I'll be right there!"

Marian put one foot on the stairs, and the lights everywhere went dark.

"I can't see, I can't see!"

“Stay where you are, stay in your room!”

But when the lights flickered on and off again, Marian saw with horror that Jimmy-- tangled in the sheet from his bed-- stood at the top of the slippery wooden stairs. Twenty-two hard oak risers separated her from her boy. She wished anew that they had been better prepared for winter. Paul had always taken care of that. Now, they suffered. No flashlights, no candles, no rug on the stairs. What had she been thinking? If Jimmy tried to come to her in the dark, he would certainly take a terrible fall.

Marian's blood pressure began to rise. She frantically wondered what she should do. If she tried to go up the stairs in the dark, she herself might fall. “Jimmy, just sit down. Just sit down on the top of the stairs, and you and I will wait out the storm.”

But a tiny, little black thought darted out of her head like a snake and raced a path of anxiety down the length of her spine. Then it crawled, all wet and sharp-toothed, into the web of her veins. Marian thought that she smelled smoke.

Had the one attempt she'd made to prepare for bad weather somehow failed? She had built her very first fire that night, as insurance against the loss of electric heat. Bringing in the logs for the hearth had made her feel competent and steady. Bearing their weight had made her feel strong. Now, the question was, Had she built the fire correctly? Had a smoldering log rolled out onto the carpet? Was it all in her head?

Marian appraised the situation with escalating panic: If she left Jimmy to check on the fire, the boy would fall down the stairs. If she stayed with Jimmy, and her nose was correct, then her house was in flames. She was suddenly overwhelmed with fear. Trembling in the dark at the bottom of the stairs, all of her faults flooded her mind. *I should've brought my cell phone into my room, she thought. I could've put it in my pocket. I could've called someone to help us.*

Marian held out her hands in the dark. It was a gesture of entreaty. She recalled her mother-in-law's letters. She remembered Donna's appeals for hope. Deep in her heart, she turned to someone she had never known. "Help me!" she prayed aloud. "Be my God! I don't want to be afraid anymore!"

"Mommy!" Jimmy cried.

Marian made a decision. "Call to me and I will answer you. Call to me and I will answer you," she recited the verse, over and over. "Please, God, help me get to my son."

Certain that it was the acrid smell of an evil fire that filled her nostrils, and shaking violently under her robe, Marian Di'Angelo began to climb the stairs. "My house is not burning down," she whispered. "There is no fire. My house will not burn down." She felt for the wall and held tight to the rail. Outside, the howling wind throttled her windows with knotty, icy fists, but she took one stair at a time. She was slowly, steadily moving upward. Marian was not walking through a fire of a flaming sort. She was walking through the heat of absolute terror.

At the top of the stairs stood her own little child, and she pulled him close with an eager hug. For the first time in her life, Marian said, in faith, “Thank you, God.” Jimmy and Marian went to sleep on the landing, holding each other’s hand. The storm outside raked the roof with slashes of icy knives, but the pair clung to each other in safety. The fear of fire in Marian’s mind never burned again.

* * *

“It’s the first of the month,” Marian said, pulling her chair to the desk. Her calendar bore a big red circle to brightly mark the date. Stacks of obligations were neatly placed in rows. Her books stood at attention. “Time to pay the mortgage,” she said efficiently.

Marian opened a special drawer in her desk. She smiled at what she saw. She’d been storing a surprise: A newspaper ad for a spectacular red-and-blue swing set. *If we get the new swings this weekend, we can save six percent when we pay with cash*, she thought.

A knock at the front door roused her from her daydreams.

“I’ll get it!” Donna yelled. Incredibly, Marian had always managed to pay the girl. Whenever it looked like she’d have to leave, extra funding always turned up. A twenty-dollar bill was found in the washer. Forty dollars were in the penny jug. Donna joked that Marian was the widow with the miraculous jar of oil. She simply never ran out of money. Rushing to the door, Donna opened it and nearly swooned.

“Got a package for Mrs. Marian Di’Angelo,” the handsome deliveryman said. He was tall, with a dark moustache and beard. Something about him was very familiar to Donna. “It’s marked ‘Jordan River, Israel,’” he said.

Marian watched Donna peer dreamily out the foyer window as the deliveryman drove away. She came in just as Donna strained to see the truck round the bend in the driveway.

“He must have been really nice,” Marian said. “You look like you’ve seen a vision.”

“What’s this?” Donna asked. “You ordered something from Israel?”

“I’ve decided to go back to baking. Jimmy and I need the income. I’m going to work out of my kitchen, maybe start a catering business. I’ve called several of the local restaurants, and they’ve placed orders for my lemon cheesecakes. I’ll start there and add some new flavors as I expand.”

“So what’s the connection? Did you want lemons by air mail?”

“Actually, Donna,” Marian said self-consciously, “I’d like to anoint my kitchen. That’s why I wanted the water.”

“You didn’t have to send to Israel for anointing water!”

“I know, but I didn’t want to take any chances. That stuff better work! I really need the money!”

“It’s not the water, it’s the prayer,” Donna said. She laughed with her friend and unwrapped the box.

“Donna,” Marian said. “I need to tell you something. I don’t have the kind of faith that you do. Not yet.”

“What kind is that?”

“A strong faith. I still have a lot of unanswered questions. God healed you. He didn’t heal Paul. Why? I’m going to have to live a long time to have a faith like yours.”

“How long you live is up to God, Marian. Like with Paul,” Donna said gently. “That’s how it is with faith. God customizes it for every person’s needs, kind of like different flavors for different people. Ask God to build your faith to fit his plans for you. Don’t try to copy my faith.”

Marian looked at Donna. “Thank you for being my friend. All these months when I’ve had to learn to be a new person, you stayed with me.” Her words hung in the air for a moment. She paused to acknowledge their meaning.

“Let’s just say we’ll set out to be new people together,” Donna replied. She reached over to take Marian’s hand. “How many orders for cakes do you have?”

Marian ran through her list excitedly, counting off the names of restaurants on her fingers. “Take a look at the oven,” she said. “It’s going to work better than ever.”

Donna followed her, carrying the box of holy water, into the kitchen.