

LITTLE EARTHQUAKES



Oscar Thomas Wilkens, our unexpected sixth child, was born on the second Sunday of Advent, a day dedicated to peace amid the dizzying preparations of Christmas. My husband, Todd, had led family prayers asking God (no, begging!) for more peace in our lives every night for years; we rejoiced in the liturgical timing of Oscar's arrival as an answer to that constant prayer. Oscar's birthday was also the feast day of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children. We baptized Oscar at our Catholic parish in Austin, Texas, on the Feast of the Holy Family.

Oscar may not have been part of our plans, but his birth seemed to be a heavenly response from God. Peace. Children. Holy Family. These cosmic confluences were a confirmation that we were following God's will for our family, even when his will seemed heavy and complicated. (And loud. Our house is really, really loud.)

Oscar's birth changed everything, in the way that these things usually change when a new human makes his acquaintance with the world. We fell in love, the angels danced, and the stars and planets aligned as our family welcomed our beautiful, perfect, matchless boy.

Exactly five months later, our beautiful, perfect, matchless boy began seizing in my arms during the very first hour of a retreat for mothers. While a beatific, smiling nun offered me and my fellow retreatants an impassioned exhortation about the spirituality of motherhood, Oscar offered an entirely different one of his own.

Let me tell you a secret about the spirituality of motherhood: suffering is required. Suffering comes to all of us, parent and child

alike, in one form or another. It creeps in during the night or in broad daylight. It catches at your child's breath, or his heart, or her right arm—or his brain. When your life is inextricably entwined with that of another, and a sliver of your inmost being is walking around inside another body, your sufferings are entwined as well. Love is impossible without opening your heart to suffering. Loving well means baring all the nerves of your body and tendrils of your soul wide open.

Suffering can draw us directly into the heart of Christ—not only us, but the people who surround us too. Suffering is not meant to be borne alone. It cries out to be shared, and that cry calls forth love in action, and wherever charity and love exist, God comes to dwell. Bearing suffering well is one of the surest paths to heaven.

This is the story of how I learned to bear mine.



On a clear-skied afternoon in 2016, my mother and I drove out into the remote Texas Hill Country with baby Oscar to spend Mother's Day weekend at a retreat hosted by the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist.

After unpacking, we filed in to the spacious, light-soaked chapel. During Vespers, the evening prayer of the universal Church, Oscar nursed contentedly in my arms and my shoulders relaxed, the weight of my daily cares slipping from them, borne away by the sisters' steady chanting. By the time Sister Joseph Andrew began her opening talk, he had dozed off in my lap, snuggled sideways against my chest, breathing evenly, a trail of milk dribbling from his rosy bow lips. About twenty minutes later, Sister was still speaking about feminine virtue and the spiritual gifts of motherhood, and my pacified mind was beginning to wander, when Oscar awoke with a very sudden, very violent jerk.

I looked down quickly, expecting him to start crying. Instead, his wide, sea-blue eyes gazed up at me with surprise, then wonder, then joy. An instant later, those eyes went vacant, his smile stretched into a grimace, and his arms and legs all stiffened in unison.

His limbs began trembling, spasmodically, forcefully. I clutched him harder to keep him from shaking right off my lap, while I stared in disbelief. For several eternal seconds, I couldn't understand what was happening. Then a single word coalesced in my brain:

Seizure.

I stood and began to awkwardly, frantically climb over several seated women to reach the end of the row, cradling a shaking Oscar tightly against my chest all the while. Without a plan, I thumped backward through the heavy double doors.

Throughout my acrobatics, Oscar kept seizing. He was rigid, shaking, unresponsive, and his face was getting redder and redder. Foamy puddles formed at the corners of his mouth and spilled down his chin. We were miles from the nearest hospital and out of cell-phone range; primitive instinct swamped logic, and I huddled with him in an empty, shady corner, falling back on the muscle memory of motherhood, the familiar motions and words of rocking a fussy baby. They were woefully inadequate to the task at hand, but they were all I had. "It's okay, my love. Mama's here. Shh."

After ninety seconds that stretched into eternity, the shaking slowed. His limbs relaxed. The light came back into Oscar's eyes, locked now on mine. His arms and legs began jerking again, this time in unison, slowly and rhythmically, whole-body hiccups. His gorgeous blue eyes grew unfathomably deep, looking at something above and beyond me. Suddenly, Oscar's face was overcome with a smile not his own. It looked radiant, otherworldly—positively angelic—as his limbs kept hiccupping.

He's saying goodbye, I thought, panic rising in my chest. The world spun and receded. All I could see was my son's face, fixed in a spotlight, smiling that unnatural, peaceful smile. *The next thing that is going to happen is he will stop breathing. He is smiling like that because he knows he is about to die.*

But he didn't die. Instead, the jerking slowed, then subsided. His smile faded, his eyes clouded, and Oscar began to wail.

My mother joined me outside, and we tried to hold a tense, hurried discussion, while Oscar screamed and screamed. One of the nuns came over and asked to help him; I hesitated. Was it irresponsible to

say yes, to hand him over to a stranger after such a freakish episode? I laid him in her arms, and she enfolded Oscar in her white robes, swishing back and forth down the crushed gravel path in smooth, rocking motions. The sun was setting just behind the two of them; their bodies pressed together blocked the light. They were framed by the pink and golden glow of the immense Texas sky, cedars and hills falling away below them. Their peaceful silhouette betrayed nothing of the specter that loomed over my son.

Less than three hours after arriving, we packed up and left, bound for the children's hospital. As soon as we explained to the sisters what had happened, the entire retreat—a hundred consecrated nuns and lay women, spiritual mothers and the regular bodily kind—began to pray for Oscar.

These were the first. Many would follow.



Until Oscar's first seizure, if you had asked anyone who knew me, you would have been informed that I was a devout and faithful Catholic. I had reverted to the religion of my childhood in my midtwenties, after ten years of resisting it with all my might. My husband, a convert from agnosticism, embraced his fledgling faith at the same time. The reality that both of us crossed from a life of secularism to a life of Catholicism *together* was a singular grace for our young marriage, during the middle weeks of my first pregnancy.

But a crack in that faith now opened, a weakening that would widen and spread from end to end.

A few months after the incident, on a brazenly bright September day, the kind where the southern sunlight forces you to walk squinting down at the pavement, I sat in the adoration chapel of my home parish. Sunlight filtered through innumerable shards of colored glass, casting rainbow reflections across the marble walls and onto my two fists, balled in my lap as I sat in the solitude of that sacred space. The only sounds were the whoosh of my heartbeat filling my eardrums and the scrape of my ragged breath, in and out like knives.

I had come to the chapel that day for the first time in months. I had come to beg for a reprieve, a do-over. I had asked Jesus, “Please. Please. Can this just be something he will get over? Please, won’t you make this all go away and make my son whole again?”

I had not come intending to pray that prayer, or even to pray. My prayers had dried up like the creeks and lakes around us during the long, hot days of that summer, leaving only an occasional fossilized footprint along the dry beds of my spiritual practice. Adoration had been, at other points in my life, a weekly habit of mine, but this visit to the adoration chapel was my first since the Mother’s Day retreat—since it had become apparent that Oscar’s was not the “good” kind of childhood epilepsy, easily managed, easily outgrown.

Our parish’s adoration chapel is small, intimate, and beautiful. Stained glass windows with remarkable, lifelike detailing line the upper half of the two exterior walls. All the chairs and kneelers face the Blessed Sacrament displayed through a transparent opening in a monstrance—an elaborate, jewel-encrusted sunburst perched atop a stand—revealing Christ to those assembled. Catholics believe that Christ is literally present in the Sacrament: not present in a mystical or symbolic way, but fully and completely present—body and blood, soul and divinity—mysteriously clothed under the appearance of bread. The chapel is a place where anyone can go to sit in Jesus’ literal presence.

My visit was intended to be a momentary drop-in. I had a few hours to spare and no kids in tow, and it was meant to be a baby step—five minutes, tops, with my Lord and Savior, like the tortured adolescent gracing the family living room just long enough to ask for her allowance and the car keys. Jesus and I were barely on speaking terms.

I began with centering breaths, trying to clear my mind, then followed with a few of the Catholic prayers I knew so well I could say them in my sleep: an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and a Glory Be. I breathed in and out, forming three simple words that anchored my prayers to my breath.

Ecce. “Behold, your child is here before you, Lord, broken and tired.” The time between the breaths was for an acceptance of my own smallness.

Fiat. “Let it be done; please help me to accept your will for me today.” I inhaled the silent power of God, his grace, his goodness, his almighty power, the reception of God’s gifts and his plan.

Magnificat. “My soul magnifies the Lord, the Lord who I know is good and loves me no matter what.” I exhaled the word as an offering.

This slow inhale and exhale with the three simple words of prayer had been a practice dear to me for years, since I first read about it in a book, *Consoling the Heart of Jesus* by Fr. Michael Gaitley. The steady exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide, acceptance and praise, usually worked when nothing else would. Lately, nothing else would.

Before I had gathered more than a dozen of these slow, intentional breaths, the thing I had been hiding in my heart crept out and announced itself unbidden. I whispered the words that reflected the deepest, the truest, the only cry of my heart: “Please, Lord. Please. Heal my son.”

Secluded with Jesus for all of ten minutes, I had been admiring the stained glass windows as I meditated. Suddenly, those windows sprang to life.

That might have been a helpful aid to my contemplation if the windows had been of charming biblical scenes: Noah’s ark and the rainbow! The nativity, with happy angels and shepherds singing Gloria! But no, the windows in our chapel shone forth pain and anguish, like destroying angels. One showed seven swords piercing the heart of Mary, representing the seven moments when mothering Jesus cost Mary her own excruciating pain. Another depicted the Pietà, the moment when Mary received in her arms the dead, bloody body of her son.

Over and over again, the Pietà, the Pietà.

The visions played themselves wildly before my eyes while I sat rooted to my spot, ensnared so deeply I couldn’t even cry. All the pain in the entire world poured into my heart like molten lead, burning me alive from the inside out.

My vision went dark. The roaring pain went dull. I heard interior words, but not my own, as clearly as a tolling bell.

This is your cross, and I am not going to take it away from you. I will be with you, and I will help you, but it is yours to carry.

Sometimes, to this day, I wish I could go back, take my old self by the shoulders, and whisper to her, “See? See here? *He will be with you, and he will help you.*” From the very first seconds, Jesus had shown up. He sent my mother with me that weekend so that I did not face the most terrifying moment of my life alone. He prodded that nun to walk over and comfort my inconsolable child. He blanketed our family in the prayers of community from the precise inflection point when our Before became After.

What I received in those words in the chapel was a deluge, an epic flood to refill the parched creek beds of my soul, but what I thought I received was a curse.

What Jesus was telling me was *I will be with you, and I will help you.*

But I had asked him to heal my son, so what I heard him say was “No.”

2.

TOGETHER, ALONE



Almost one year to the day after Oscar's first seizure at the retreat, I stood before Gate B23 in John F. Kennedy International Airport, near an eight-foot-tall sign bearing a white cross on a red shield. Oscar lay quietly in his stroller next to me. I watched surreptitiously from behind a pillar as two women wearing name tags that matched the banner chatted enthusiastically. When a couple approached the counter, the women greeted them with warm hugs and ushered them to elevator doors that swallowed them away to a hidden fate.

I inhaled all the courage I could glean from the stale air, thick with the bouquet of ripe travelers, trying to bury my shyness and uncertainty. Then I pushed Oscar's stroller toward the desk.

"Hi. I'm Christy Wilkens, and this is Oscar. He's one of the malades."



Malade is a French word meaning "sick." I had first heard it used in this context, referring to sick people, while reading the blog of Catholic author Mary Lenaburg. Mary's daughter, Courtney, had a medical history like Oscar's—a history that had unfolded for the past twelve months like a slow-motion train wreck. Mary wrote poignant, honest reflections about her life raising (and losing) Courtney,

including the story of their trip to Lourdes, France, as guests of a group called the Order of Malta.

Oscar, Todd, and I were embarking on the same pilgrimage, hosted annually by the same group. We had nothing left to lose; nothing else so far had worked. The further illumination of Oscar's case had revealed one crevice after another, each harboring a new devastation. Day after day, doctors reassured us that they had a plan. *It's probably this*, they would explain, *so we'll try that*.

Day after day, Oscar stymied their optimistic theories.

At first, I clung tenaciously to the hope that we were just one more medication, one more try, from the solution that would return our story to rights. We chased "normal." Our friends joined us in begging for "complete healing." I loved my son, and I wanted him well and whole. I wanted God to reveal his glory in one particular and precise way: through the total restoration of our child's health. I prayed for this, aloud, in indelible ink, unashamedly.

In secret, doubts were floating in like milkweed seeds, drifting stealthily to the ground, taking invisible root. And by the end of the first summer, the words our medical team used during consults were not "usually" or "probably." They were "tricky" and "complicated."

I chased down more information, second and third opinions. One sympathetic nurse gave us a book called *Seizures and Epilepsy in Childhood: A Guide*, which I scrutinized from cover to cover, with an obsession bordering on pathological. It turned out to be a "so your kid has had a seizure" kind of book, hopeful and reassuring. *Will my child still be able to ride a bike?*

Ride a bike? I worried about whether my child would ever be able to feed himself solid food, ideally without aspirating it into his lungs. I whipped the book angrily across the room, watching it somersault through the air.

Oscar's neurologist was one we had met the morning after Oscar's first seizure, during an overnight EEG in the hospital; she had discharged us with an all-clear and the words, "I hope we never see each other again!" (We saw each other quite regularly now.) After recounting the litany of unknowns and unclear test results, I told her about the book.