

Jesus Wept

by Julie Britt

When my husband died, I was in bed with his brother.

Ricky and I had been married six years, three months and two days when his little brother, Ben, and I gave in to the lust that just would not go away in spite of our prayers and tears.

At first it was just holding hands and talking about Ricky's condition. Then it was leaning into each other on the sofa, Ben whispering into my hair, me wanting to put my hand on his thigh. Finally, one night Ben kissed me. In no time we were on the floor, yanking at each other's clothes, moaning and sweating.

I keep trying to convince myself that it was meant to be, and that fate cancels out sin. After all, I had met Ben first and kissed him, too, before I ever met Ricky, back when we were all in high school.

But that first kiss didn't mean anything. It was one of those kissing game things at Sheila Cobb's sweet-sixteen party. I kissed a lot of boys that night. Ben's kiss was nothing special. A little too wet for my taste, if I remember correctly.

I don't remember how me and Ben had paired off at Sheila's party so long ago. Spin the bottle, more than likely, since Ben was never the type to just come up and say, "Hey, Ida, wanna go off with me and fool around?" That's exactly what Sheila's dumb cousin, Ted or Fred or something like that, said to me soon as I walked in. He was from Raleigh or Richmond, thought he was something. Gonna get a hick girl.

"Dream on, Dr. Pepper breath," I said, showing him that Pender County girls knew what was what just as well as those citified girls he was used to. He ignored me after that.

So Ben and me ended up sitting in the dark, just off to the side of Sheila's back porch, hidden from view by the Falcon perched on blocks in her yard. He was acting real shy and sweet, so I just hauled off and gave him the best smooch he'd ever had. He said so. And Ben is not a storyteller. You can believe him every time.

I met Ricky at the pool about three months later. He was trying to impress us all with his diving abilities, which weren't all that impressive, to tell you the truth. But he did look some kind of fine in those cutoff jeans. My heart was thumping so loud I thought sure Sheila and them could hear it.

When Ricky finally quit showing off, splashing everyone in the process, he walked over to us and sat himself right down, straddling the end of my beach chair. Man.

"Hey, ladies," he said, including all of us but looking special at me. "Anybody want to go swimming?"

"I do. It's too hot to lay out, and I could really use some pointers from an expert," I said, remembering too late my grandmother's advice that I should act demure when approached by a gentleman caller.

We swam and splashed around for a while. Ricky taught me how to tread water and float in case I ever fell overboard. I pretended I needed his hands underneath my arms or back to keep from sinking like a rock.

I saw no point in being demure. It saves a lot of time to find out, right up front, how a boy's hands feel. If they're too soft, then he probably doesn't work and gets money from his parents. If they're too rough, he most likely works so much that he doesn't have time for girls, and he still doesn't have any money of his own.

Ricky's hands were about right. Kind of roughly smooth. The kind of hands that send chills up your spine when you're dancing or what have you. The kind of hands you can depend on when you need an extra one, say when you've got the baby propped up on your right hip and the diaper bag under your left arm, and someone tries to hand you your change at the 7-Eleven.

Ricky and I spent the summer holding hands and kissing a lot. He was real good at it. Nothing like Ben or anyone else up to then. He kissed me like he knew who I was. When we were making out, I knew who I was. I was Ricky's girl. Special.

We got engaged after high school graduation. It was right. We never thought about not getting married. We just fit. His daddy and

mine were in the Jaycees together. Our mamas were pillars of the Jesus Name Charity Circle. Sometimes Ricky and me would help them deliver food and stuff to the less fortunate. That way we could be together on a school night.

Our wedding was a big deal. I wore white. All I usually did was kiss guys. Me and Ricky did a little more than that, since we were in love and engaged and all, but I was still practically a virgin on my wedding night.

Ben was Ricky's best man, because their father broke his leg in a mishap at the Annual Jaycees Donkey Softball Game. If they would've fed those donkeys before the tip-off, Mr. Hart's wouldn't have tried to jump across the pitcher's mound to get a mouthful of clover.

Ricky and I faced the congregation when the preacher introduced us as Mr. and Mrs. Hart for the first time, and I grinned at Ben. He smiled at me, but there were tears in his eyes. I thought that was so sweet.

Not long after our wedding, Ben moved to Raleigh to find himself or something. He read a lot. He called and sent cards on the appropriate occasions and visited on your major holidays: Christmas, Easter, first day of quail season. But by then I was real busy as a homemaker, wife and manicurist/tanning bed operator. Then Junior came along, and I hardly had time to do my own nails or work on my tan lines and other stuff, much less get too sociable. So I didn't really talk to him that much. He was just another one of the men you had to feed and clean up after while they watched football or golf.

When Ricky got cancer, Ben came home to help take care of things. First, he had to take care of their mother, who just couldn't believe that her precious boy, who'd never hurt a fly, had a dreadful disease that was likely to cut his life short.

I was torn up about it, too. Things had been going so good for me and Ricky. He was a manager at the Food Lion, and I was almost in

the running for assistant manager of the nail department down at Nails and Sun. We had our little boy and were talking about not using protection so we could maybe get a little girl, too. Since we made love every Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, and even on Sundays once I convinced Ricky that it wasn't a sin, I think we had a pretty good shot at it.

But things were never the same again after Ricky passed out at work. He keeled over right in the middle of cleaning up aisle seven. The last thing Ricky's hands ever did was wipe up some busted jars of strained peas and sweet potatoes that had been knocked off the shelf, most likely by one of the Thompson brats. Every Thursday before leaving for work, he would say: "Baby, wish me luck. It's Miz Thompson's shopping day." I can't remember if I actually wished him luck that day.

It was a brain thing. A tumor that couldn't be stopped with drugs, scalpels or all the Jesus Name Charity Circle's prayers. Fortunately for him, Ricky went downhill fast. Now that sounds ugly, but what I mean is he didn't have to be aware of his own suffering or the misery his condition was inflicting on his loved ones.

Before long he just sort of faded. His body mostly looked the same, thanks to the nutrition he was receiving through the tubes at the Pine View Nursing Home. But my Ricky was gone. I'd squeeze and squeeze his hands, hoping for some sort of response. I'd lay my cheek in his palm, just to feel him touch me. But it wasn't the same. It gave me a sick feeling in my stomach, just like when I used to ask him if I looked pretty while I was pregnant and swoll up. He'd always say, "Why, naturally you do, baby. You're still my little Ida under that baby fat."

After his mother settled down, Ben also had to help take care of Junior, mine and Ricky's two-year-old. He was a handful from the minute he was conceived. Kicked me pretty much constantly until he finally popped out after three hours of hard labor. Cried pretty constantly after that, until he learned to walk. Then he was too distracted by his newfound ability to explore, climb and break things

to take time to cry. Except on those many occasions when he'd fall off whatever he'd climbed up on.

Anyway, when they put Ricky in the nursing home ("You simply cannot take care of him at home any longer, Mrs. Hart"), Junior became a royal pain in the you-know-what. The family counselor who often tried to explain things to me said, "Children have a keen sense of abandonment. I know you're not neglecting your child, but that's how he interprets your frequent visits to the nursing home, during which you leave him with an alternate caregiver. He compensates for these negative feelings by demanding your attention."

I never swallowed that psychomumbojumbo, but I think what the preppy counselor (Trey something or other) was getting at is this: Young'uns need a lot of attention. When you're taking care of his daddy, leaving him with Mrs. Burns across the street and her spinster sister, Nettie, he feels jealous and generally pissed. He gets back at you by whining, crying, hanging onto your leg and peeing in the bed.

Whatever the reasons, however you explain it, I just knew I needed another set of hands. I'd done lost the ones I'd counted on since that day in the pool. They were of no use to me for nothing. So Ben stepped in and became what Trey called a surrogate father for Junior. I got my first real night's sleep in months when Ben let Junior spend the night with him.

"Ida, you just stay home and take it easy tonight," Ben told me, gently brushing a strand of hair off my face. "I'll take care of Junior. Don't you worry a bit."

Ben and the baby had been gone nearly an hour when I realized I could still feel Ben's touch on my forehead. There was a sweet kind of warmth and a little tingle there, the way it feels to put your cold hands under your jacket next to your warm body on a bitter day.

My routine was fairly, well, routine. Getting Junior dressed and fed and redressed. Washing Ricky's clothes, making sure his name was in each item. Sitting in his room all day, watching him drool and wondering if he knew I was there.

"Mama, I just can't do this any more," I told her one day when she called to check on us. She had her own hands full, what with Daddy's emphysema and general orneriness. But I don't think she really understood.

"Honey, the good Lord gives us all the strength we need to face life's struggles and disappointments. I'll pray that you'll get a blessing and an extra measure of faith to help you through Ricky's illness. The circle is remembering y'all too."

Prayers. I had done prayed out. The doctors said Ricky would never get better, so what was there to pray for?

I looked up at my needlepoint sampler on the wall over Ricky's easy chair. He had been so proud of the way I had stitched and stitched every night while we were watching television. It was big, eight by ten inches, and had zillions of colorful flowers and birds and stuff for its border. At the very bottom was a little church in a vale and a set of Jesus' praying hands.

I was supposed to stitch the entire Lord's Prayer in the center of the thing. I had never done letters before. After all that border stitching, I wasn't real enthusiastic about doing the boring letters. Besides, Junior had started teething and it was nearly impossible for me to sit still long enough to stitch my name. But it needed something in that white space, and since the border screamed out peace and love and God and such, it just had to be a Bible verse.

Finally I got tired of looking at it and wondering what to stitch. I guess I needed closure, as Trey would say. So I just up and stitched the shortest verse I knew right smack in the middle. I wasn't sure I'd done the right thing until Mama saw it.

"'Jesus wept.' Oh, Ida, that's so special, him being so sad in the midst of all that beauty. Just like I'm sure us poor sinners make him feel when we don't count our blessings and live right," she said, tearing up.

Ida wept, I thought. But I couldn't. I was just numb. I needed a little caregiving myself.

The next day, Mama took Junior to the circle meeting. Ben was mowing our lawn and checking out our car. Something needed flushing, he'd said.

Standing at the kitchen window, scrubbing something or other, watching a man do man stuff in the yard, made me feel real womanly all of a sudden. I took a tall glass of tea out to Ben. That's all. He wiped his hands on his shirt before taking the glass. Then he grinned at me and chugged it down.

"Thanks, Ida. You doing all right today?"

I don't know what made me do it. Maybe it was the way Ben's eyes were scrunched up in the sun. Or the way he licked a dribble of tea off his lip. Or plain old loneliness. I just up and grabbed hold of his hand and hung on for dear life.

"Ida?"

"Ben, I'm not all right. I may never be all right again. I can't stand this."

Ben just smiled and squeezed my hand, which was shaking and sweating and holding him so tight I don't know how he ever got loose. Then he gave me a brotherly pat on the shoulder, sniffed and wiped his eyes and went back to his work.

I reckon he thought I was talking about Ricky. I think I was, a little bit. But mostly I was thinking about how strong Ben's hand was. It wasn't laying white and pale against a sheet. It wasn't tethered to an IV. It was a strong brown hand. That's when I knew I'd found the hands I needed.

I prayed one more time that night: "Father, forgive me for what I'm liable to do."

Ben and I started spending more time together. Mama, thinking I wanted extra time for Ricky, kept the baby a lot. Ricky didn't know which end was up. Sitting by myself in his stale room day in and day out made no sense. And Ben and I needed some comforting.

He was doing a lot of the man stuff around the house, so I had to repay him somehow. I cooked his favorite meals and let him watch his favorite television shows while I cleaned up. Then I'd sit real close to him on the couch. Neither of us would sit in Ricky's chair.

There was a crackling in the air every time we were together. I knew Ben felt it, too. I could tell by the way his eyes glittered. I could tell by the way he would glance, from time to time, at Ricky's chair. But mostly I could tell by the way he kept his hands clenched by his sides, like he was trying to keep them from doing something they shouldn't.

I knew he was going to kiss me. We'd been watching television for a while, but we hadn't said a word or laughed at the shows or mentioned Ricky or anything. We just stared at the screen, both of us wound up so tight you'd have thought we would bust. I got to where I couldn't breathe right, kind of raggedy. Ben was holding his breath. I never knew anybody could go that long without breathing.

Then all of a sudden at the same time we just looked at each other and took a great big breath like we were about to dive into something. Next thing I knew I was straddling Ben's lap and he had his hands under my shirt, unhooking my bra, spreading his warmth all over my back and shoulders and breasts. I was sucking on his bottom lip and trying to get his belt undone.

We had rolled onto the floor, trying to undress each other without taking our lips apart, when the blasted phone rang.

It was Mama. Junior had a bad fever, so Ben left (I didn't tell Mama he was there), and I took care of my baby. It took about a week for him to get over that ear infection.

Finally, Junior was staying with Mama again. I had told her I needed to catch up on some sleep.

There was something I needed to catch up on, and Ben was glad to oblige. When he finally got inside me, I thought I would die. His hands were everywhere, comforting and thrilling me at the same time. I just kept thinking, I'm so glad Ricky will never know about this. It would kill him.

Ricky died that night.

I cleared away Ricky's stuff, then I tried to get back to a normal routine, taking care of my baby and going to work. But I still needed a helping hand. So when Ben asked me to marry him, I said okay.

The circle ladies, not knowing we had jumped the gun, thought it was real sweet that a guy would want to take care of his brother's family that way.

That reminded me of a Bible story about a crowd of men who married their dead brother's wife. There was some big controversy about whose wife she'd be in Heaven. Jesus had to say something clever to clear it up.

I think about that every time I look at the needlepoint sampler hanging over Ben's new easy chair.

At Ricky's funeral, the preacher said my husband was in the spiritual realm, up in heaven, healthy, happy and looking down at his loved ones paying their respects. It had dawned on me then that maybe Ricky did know what had happened in our bed the night he died. I was suddenly embarrassed and ashamed. I wept. Everybody in the church thought I was grieving for my husband. I reckon I was.

