

*Our
Lady of
Sorrows*

Susanne Davis

OUR LADY OF SORROWS Catholic Church sat on a large expanse of lawn one block south of Memorial Park in Omaha. It was early June and beds of annual flowers and perennial bushes were in full bloom, their brilliant colors reflected in the mist from the watering system. Jordana Colon was skipping school for the first time all year and she had been headed for the park until she remembered that the school called the house of every absent student and with her father home now that he was laid off, he was almost certain to come looking for her. Memorial Park had a carousel and a snack bar; it was where all the kids hung out if they weren't going to the mall and her father was sure to look in both places. But he would never look in Our Lady of Sorrows.

Jordana had passed the church hundreds of times. The building was large and ornate, with flying buttresses and spires and saints tucked into little alcoves. As she approached, she saw a statue of Mary tucked between purple azaleas. Mary on the half shell, that's what her father and other members of the Church of the Living Word derisively called the catholic relic, but Jordana had often found herself staring as she passed. Something about the way the infant laid its tiny hand on Mary's breast. This time she averted her eyes and climbed the cathedral steps.

Inside, the air smelled of incense and flowers. Jordana slid into a pew. The church was quiet, so quiet that she could have slept—she had lain awake in her bed all night the previous night—but she didn't sleep. Instead, she stared at the stained glass windows: Jesus carrying the cross, then Jesus on the cross. The colors glowed like prisms of light in a kaleidoscope: they hurt her eyes. Beside her, candles flickered in an alcove, where people put money in a box and then lit a candle for some special prayer. Jordana wondered what they prayed for.

People began filling the pews. Noon mass. A woman slid into the pew next to her. Jordana didn't look at her, but she felt the woman's eyes on her. Abruptly, the woman leaned over, right into Jordana's space and whispered, "Why honey, you're pregnant, aren't you?"

"No." Jordana slid away from the woman as she spoke. Then she glanced over her shoulder; possibly the woman wasn't even talking to her and she had spoken foolishly and revealed herself. But the woman continued staring at her in the most intense way, her gaze boring through Jordana's skull. Jordana looked away and the truth was clear. She had only taken the test over the weekend and she had not yet told anyone.

"How did you know?" she asked. The woman had dark red hair, not a natural color red, but a deep-henna red, which was cut short and very close to her head. She had nice, square features and deep blue eyes.

At the confirmation of her guess, the woman smiled broadly, revealing large white teeth, square and straight. Her features were perfectly ordered, but when she spoke—"You were holding your stomach like I used to do. How do you feel?"—she jerked her head as if reigning in some internal tension.

"Okay, I guess," Jordana answered, looking away. She didn't want to discuss being pregnant.

"If you're not sick to your stomach, it's probably a girl. At least that's been my experience."

"How many children do you have?"

"Three." The woman fumbled around in her purse, pulled out a string of carved rosary beads and wrapped them around her finger.

Just then, the priest emerged from the vestibule and mass began. Jordana followed the kneeling and standing and genuflecting as best she could.

After the ceremony, the woman spoke to her again. “Did you enjoy the mass?”

Jordana shrugged. The woman was pretty, except her eyes, which were bright, might have been too bright. They pinned Jordana in their beam and she couldn’t move from it. So she shrugged again and said, “It was different from my church.”

“What church is that, honey?”

“Lutheran,” she said. They had been Lutheran once.

“You have a mellow nature,” the woman observed. “This is good for the baby. Actually, it’s a very anti-establishment thing to get pregnant so young these days, you’re what? Eighteen?”

Jordana nodded.

“But it makes sense in some ways to do it young,” the woman was talking again. “Get these kids while you’re young. These forty-year-old mothers. They can’t keep up with the rigors of infant care; I don’t care what anyone says. When you’re eighteen you can stay up all night, go all day, have four kids by the time you’re twenty-four. Have them in school by the time you’re thirty and be out in the work force for thirty years before you retire.”

It made sense the way this woman put it, although she didn’t want to have four kids by age twenty-four—or ever.

“I think it would be good if you came to my prayer group meeting tonight. It’s a group of very supportive, loving women.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think so,” Jordana said. Bad enough to be pregnant. She wasn’t going to make matters worse by attending some prayer group. Then, a picture popped into her head of the little embryo sprouting its stumpy arms and legs like a bean and its shoot. “When is this prayer meeting?” she asked.

“Tonight at seven,” the woman said. “I can pick you up if you like.”

“No, no—” Jordana said. “I’m not far. I’ll meet you back here tonight.”

Jordana spent the day hiding amidst the damp mops and oversized containers of bleach and soap in the church basement. Just before seven, she snuck upstairs. By now, her parents would be worried, but she still couldn’t bring herself to go home. Jordana peered out to see women filtering into the small brick building attached to the big church. She

watched for a bit and did not see the woman whom she had met earlier in the day, but she decided she would go in anyway. The sign on the door said "Prayer Meeting. All Welcome." Jordana took a deep breath and slid into a seat near the back.

The room smelled of burning wax. Stained glass windows smaller than those in the church surrounded her on all sides. Women were gathering in a semi-circle on the folding chairs. In the middle of the circle stood a podium set up as an altar, with burning candles, roses in a vase, and a bible. One of the women said an opening prayer. There was some noise in the entryway, and then the woman who had invited Jordana came in and marched straight to the front, where she took an empty seat. She had changed into a flowery skirt and white sandals. She scanned the room and when she saw Jordana she smiled and waved. Jordana waved back.

One of the women went to the podium and read a story from the gospel about Mary and Joseph losing Jesus and finding him days later in a temple. When she finished, a hush fell over the group. Someone expressed sympathy for Mary as a mother, not understanding the full meaning of her son's life. Someone else admired the way Mary saved the mysteries in her heart as if having some deep sense of faith that would be explained in the future. Jordana opened her eyes—everyone else had their eyes closed—and looked around for a priest or some official of the church. But there were only these women stating their own ideas about things.

Soon enough the reflections ended and the women pushed back their chairs and sang a song, "Here I Am, Lord." After the song they began hugging each other. Before Jordana could even get up, the woman she had met earlier in the day approached her.

"I'm so glad you made it." She squeezed Jordana's elbow. The woman's hair was now tucked behind her ears, giving her whole face an open appearance. The light in her pale blue eyes seemed less frantic; she smiled at Jordana in a way that took her whole person into consideration and reminded her of her mother. Jordana felt a pang of loneliness.

The woman looked at Jordana's clothes—her wrinkled skirt and oversized T-shirt. "Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"No," Jordana said. "Not yet."

"I live just down Crown Street," the woman said, pointing in a direction

east of the church. “Come to my house. My husband took the kids to the drive-in movies tonight. I’d love to fix you a hamburger or spaghetti, if you want.”

“Really?” Jordana asked.

“Absolutely.” The woman was already guiding her by the elbow.

“I’d love a hamburger,” Jordana said. “That sounds great.”

The woman turned and waved goodbye to a few women gathered around a table with cookies and brownies. Jordana went over, grabbed a cookie, and then followed the woman outside to where June bugs and the sound of crickets filled the air.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“My name is Rita. Rita Clover,” the woman said. “And yours?”

Jordana took a moment to swallow. “Jennifer,” she replied.

“Well, Jennifer, you’ve got to eat three square meals a day,” Rita said as they strolled along. “Even if you don’t feel like it, or you can eat small meals and healthy snacks in between, but you’ve got to make sure the baby gets good nutrition.”

“Tell me—how did you really know I’m pregnant?” Jordana was wishing she had grabbed two cookies. She pressed her hands against her abdomen to relieve the hunger pains.

“No, don’t worry,” the woman laughed, misunderstanding her gesture. “You don’t show a bit. You’re so tall and thin; you’re going to be one of those that don’t show until about six months, I bet. Are you taking prenatal vitamins?”

Jordana shook her head.

“How far along are you?”

“Just about five weeks, I think. No more than that. I don’t even feel pregnant yet.” Just saying the word pregnant sounded like a foreign language. “So, how did you know?” Jordana asked again.

“Well, I’m glad you feel good,” Rita said, ignoring her question. “But it’s important to start those vitamins right away. I’ve got some at home that I can give you.”

They walked down a maple-lined street. Jordana was thinking she should turn right around and go back home, tell her parents that she was pregnant and begin to face the consequences. But the thought of her father’s

reaction—the anger that would curl his lip and squint his eyes, anger like a whip inside his body just ready to lash out at her—changed her mind.

Just then the woman said, “We’re right here.” She pointed out a raised ranch, light blue with black shutters. The house stood between a neat gray cape and a large white colonial. The house, like all the ones surrounding it, looked so normal. The landscaping around the property was its finest feature. Flowers bloomed everywhere along the walk and under bushes. Jordana followed Rita up the steps.

Rita opened the door—it wasn’t locked—and went straight to the kitchen off the front hall. She took out the meat and a frying pan and quickly shaped a patty and set it in the hot pan where it started to sizzle and spit fat. Aside from the cross hanging in the window above the sink, the room looked like anybody else’s kitchen, decorative crocks on the counter, table in the middle of the room, clock on the wall, clean white appliances, tile floor.

In no time, the burger was cooked and the woman put it in a thick deli bun with tomato wedges and lettuce on the side.

“Do you cook like this for your kids?” Jordana asked as she picked up the burger and started to devour it.

Rita laughed. “It’s just a burger, honey. Nothing special. I wish my kids reacted that way to burgers. I get one of them groaning about how red meat’s not healthy and one complaining that I didn’t cook it enough and my husband that I cooked it too long!” She shook her head, still smiling. “They’re a trial, that’s for sure.” She went away and brought back a large plastic bottle of vitamins and set them down next to Jordana’s plate. Without Jordana asking, she made another hamburger.

Jordana ate the second burger, wiped her hands and said, “Thank you. That was delicious.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, Jennifer, you are welcome.” Rita shook her head and smiled. She was seated across the table from Jordana. Now she leaned forward on her elbows and her face became serious.

“Jennifer, seeing you so young and healthy, growing this baby inside you, why it dredges up so much emotion.” She shook her head again and pressed her hand to her mouth. She glanced at Jordana, and then looked out the window.

Dusk was falling. The peep frogs filled the air with their song.

When Rita looked back, her face was filled with a sadness Jordana had not detected earlier at the church.

"I lost a baby," Rita whispered. Her face, which had been smooth just a moment earlier, was full of pain. She had to swallow before she could speak again. "Just about two years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Jordana was beginning to wish she had not come.

"I know," Rita said. "You're surprised I could even have a baby at my age."

"No," Jordana protested. "I wasn't thinking that."

Rita went on speaking in a voice as soft as cotton. "But through my loss, God has graced me with a special power."

Jordana leaned back, away from Rita.

Rita leaned forward a bit more.

"What are you talking about?" Jordana asked. "What power?" She pushed her chair against the wall. Still, there wasn't much space between them.

Rita folded her hands together. "After my baby died, God gave me the power to bless pregnant woman and their children."

"Power to bless other people's babies?" Jordana started to look more closely at her surroundings. She could see the living room off to the right, which looked like anyone else's living room, with blue patterned fabric on the couch and a dark brown coffee table and matching end tables and lamps. On the wall above the couch hung two paintings of a rocky ocean side, one in the early morning and the other at sunset. "What kind of power?" Jordana asked.

"It's hard to explain," Rita said. "It's easier to feel." She pushed herself forward on her chair. "May I?"

"No." Jordana put her arms across her stomach.

Rita's shoulders sagged forward. "You're afraid of me."

"Well, maybe if you explain it—Are you saying God took your baby and gave you this power instead?"

"Well, I don't say he took my Josh. Goodness, no." Rita pressed a crumb into her finger and flicked it into the garbage. "It's like the reading tonight . . . I think Mary knew something divine was happening with Jesus, but she didn't know what."

Jordana thought about her parents and their conviction that everything was being revealed, including the end of the world, if only she was willing to listen.

Rita closed her eyes and her face wrinkled with pain. She stretched her hands toward Jordana. "One week after I brought Josh home, I found him dead in his crib. This teeny weenie little thing, absolutely still in his crib. I went out of my mind crying. The whole thing seemed unbelievable to begin with. Forty-five years old, having a fourth baby. We buried him and for the first month I went every day to the grave. I could hardly stand to be in the house. I kept waiting for him to cry out. I wanted to feel him in my arms. Then one day, I was out there at the cemetery feeling so desperate that I wanted to die. I had three other children and my husband. I kept telling myself, 'You have so much to be thankful for. Think of the women who can't have even one baby.' But I felt like I had nothing, I didn't even have the energy to stand. I just kept praying and praying, 'Lord have mercy on me, a sinner,' and suddenly I felt this power, I don't know—like an electrical current, running up my body—Zap! from the ground up through my body. Zap. Just like that I started looking at women and I would know right away pregnant or not. I could sense these little beings forming inside these women and I had—I still have the most unbelievable desire to touch their wombs and spread this healing power to others."

"But what *is* this healing power, exactly?" Jordana asked.

Rita cocked her head and smiled as if the very question itself reminded her of something precious. "It's love, honey."

"Love with an electrical current?" Jordana was measuring the distance between herself and the door. Rita was right in the middle of her path.

"My God, Jennifer, this is a blessing. I have a gift." Rita looked out the window, this time biting her lip between her teeth. She shook her head. "Why are people so afraid to be healed?"

"Healed from what?" Jordana asked.

Rita didn't look at her, but she answered, "From fear itself."

Jordana followed her gaze to where something appeared to be glowing beneath the apple tree outside.

"Honey, I haven't asked you anything personal about yourself—I figure that's your business . . . but I'm getting the feeling you're carrying a heavy

burden. More than just this baby. Perhaps I can help you.” Rita no sooner finished speaking and Jordana started to cry.

Rita’s intense gaze sharpened. “Anything you say will be safe with me. I don’t know where you’re from or where you’re headed and I don’t even know your real name.” She smiled. “Don’t forget, I have two teenage daughters of my own.”

Jordana slumped back into her chair. “My real name is Jordana. I don’t want this baby,” she said. “It’s all a big mistake.”

“What about the baby’s father? Can he help you?”

Jordana shook her head. “I don’t even know for sure—” she looked away as she spoke.

“I see,” Rita said. She pursed her lips. “Your parents, can you tell them?”

Jordana felt the tears come gushing forward and suddenly she was telling Rita about the day when her father had come home from a prayer meeting at the Church of the Living Word.

“I hate the government,” he had said in a rage. The rage was not new. He had been angry since he lost his job, but it was a vague and shapeless anger, like a swirl of smoke surrounding him. This day, it seemed hard and focused. He stood against the kitchen counter and light from the window framed his face, making the deep pockets of his eyes look even deeper. His long, thin nose poked out toward her and he scuffed his workboots against her mother’s clean, white linoleum. He folded his arms across his chest, and then unfolded them so he could rub his palms over his eyes. His face looked worn and tired.

Jordana had been sitting at the table doing homework. Only now she was putting everything back in her book bag. Her father went on speaking when she didn’t respond.

“They let all the work march south across the borders. Giving everything we worked so hard for to people who have no claim on it.” He stopped for a moment and tugged at the sleeves of his flannel shirt, frayed at the elbow. Jordana stood, hoping to sneak out of the room. Then her father had moved his long, thin frame to the doorway.

“And don’t let me catch you associating with those spics in the park. You stay away from them, Jordana. Do you hear me?”

It was exactly what she had wanted to avoid, but too late.

“Spics, Dad?” She stood up straight before him. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. If you mean my friends,” she was shouting now, “just forget it. What do you have against them, anyway, huh? Tell me that.” It was the kind of confrontation her mother would have diffused, but she was working a double shift at the hospital where she was a nurse.

The muscles in her father’s arms tensed and bulged. “Our jobs go down there and then they come up here and take the rest of them.” He spoke softly, but every word hit the air with force.

“Oh, you mean you hate them because they work, Dad?”

Well, that was it. He moved so quickly that she didn’t even remember him coming at her. Suddenly, her book bag was flying out of her hand and she was backed against the wall. He stood with his face so close to her that Jordana could see the red veins in his eyes.

“Jordana, you are headed for trouble,” he said. “And when you find it, you’re going to be sorry.” Then he turned and left the house.

When her mother came home that evening, she headed straight for Jordana’s room. She had a way of knowing everything without being told. She gathered Jordana into her arms and stroked her head. “You’re two peas in a pod.” She spoke gently as her fingers straightened Jordana’s hair.

“But Mom—”

Her mother hadn’t let her finish. “Jordana, I’ve told you, your father has his hurts and you shouldn’t pick at them.”

“But you don’t know! He—”

“He loves you.” Her mother spoke over her in a firm voice. “He loves you and he’s worried about you. I am too.” Her mother had tried to search Jordana’s eyes then, but Jordana had pulled away.

“She’ll just stick with my father,” Jordana said to Rita now. “And I’m afraid of what he’ll do.” Jordana was aware of the peep frogs singing their loud chorus, which sounded more insistent, less lighthearted. The streetlights came on just then and shone eerily in Rita’s backyard, illuminating the glowing object beneath the apple tree.

“What is that?” Jordana asked.

“That’s Josh’s headstone,” Rita said.

“What?” Jordana gave a start.

“Not his body, honey.” Rita spoke as if that would reassure Jordana.

“There’s laws regarding all that, but the headstone we were able to move. It’s so much easier than driving to the cemetery every day. We replaced the one there, of course. This is the one that gave me the gift.”

Jordana noticed that it was not just the streetlight shining on the stone, but a spotlight set to shine right on it. Rita stared out at it too.

“I seem to need it, like a battery,” she said. “That’s the way I think of it. To recharge myself. Don’t be afraid of it.”

But Jordana was afraid; she just wasn’t sure what she was most afraid of, the healing touch Rita claimed to have or the baby’s headstone. She started toward the door, with the vitamins and her bag. Rita scrambled out of her chair too.

“Honey, I want to tell you. I been thinking about you and this baby all day.” She reached for Jordana’s elbow, the same gesture as she had used at the church, but now it felt more ominous. Jordana pulled away before Rita could touch her.

“Here,” Rita said, moving to hold the door open instead. “Let’s go outside. Let me show you. You look like you could use some air.”

Jordana went down the steps first. Rita turned into the back yard and paused, her look appealing to Jordana. Jordana glanced around. There was no fence, nothing to prevent her escape. As soon as she realized she was free, she felt more curious about the headstone and this woman. Did she really have her dead baby’s headstone? Or, had she even lost a baby?

She followed Rita around the side of the house. In a moment they were standing before a stone that was no bigger than a box of cereal. The tiny piece of marble had a carving of an angel with wings spread across its top. Underneath were the baby’s name, Joshua McCully, and his dates. He had indeed been just a week old when he died.

“Wow,” Jordana said, imagining what it would be like to lay a tiny body in the grave. “That is really sad. I’m sorry you lost your baby.”

Rita was studying Jordana’s face, not her son’s headstone. “Jordana, I think we have been brought together for a reason, honey.” She reached out and grasped Jordana’s hands. Heat radiated from them to Jordana, spreading like liquid fire, down her torso to the root of the little seed sprouting in her. Jordana felt her body quicken so that she almost missed

Rita's distant voice saying, "Let me take care of you and then when the baby is born, you can give it to me and go on with your life."

Jordana shook her head. "Let me go."

Rita pressed her lips together, then with a voice like cut glass she said, "Jordana, it's perfectly clear. You are not equipped to have a baby. You're just a child, yourself." Rita's face twisted as she spoke, but she let Jordana go.

For one awful moment, Jordana was frozen in her spot, shocked at Rita's sudden transformation. Any goodness of Rita's touch had been poisoned by her own selfish desires. Jordana grabbed her bag and the vitamins and began to run.

"Wait!" Rita called after her.

Jordana was running down the street now, running until the house, the woman, and the headstone were out of sight. She half-expected Rita to follow her, but Rita did not. Jordana was shaking so badly she had to stop and walk several times. When she came to the church, she crossed the street where the statue of Mary was illuminated in a floodlight. The white stone glowed. Mary's expression was hidden from view, and Jordana wondered what her expression had been when she held her child for the first time. Joy? Fear? Jordana crossed the lawn and hurried over to examine the statue. She had to crush the flowers to get a close look. Why did the statue's face reveal almost none of Mary's humanity? The face was almost featureless, the eyes closed, the lips barely defined, the head bowed down.