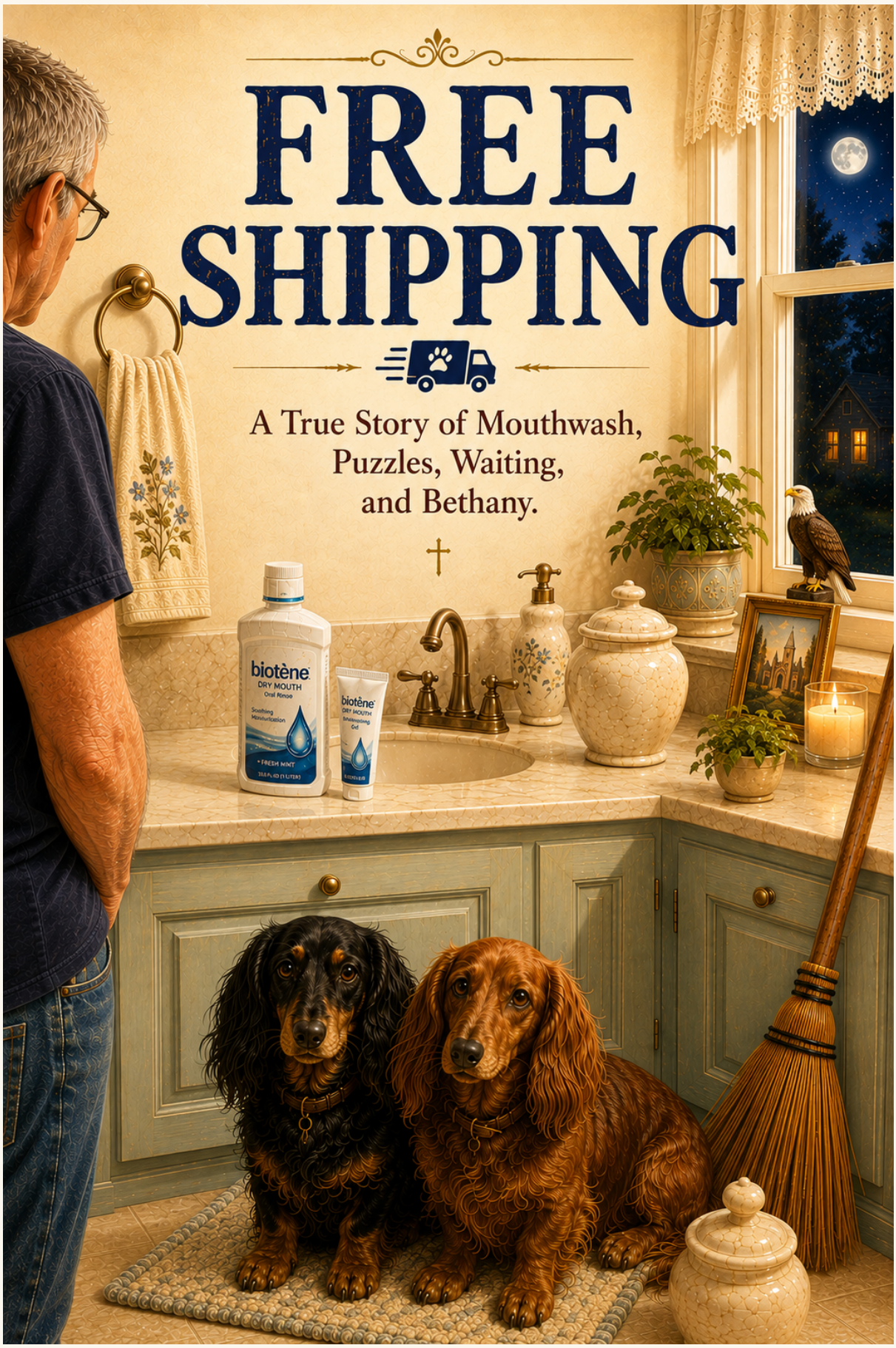

FREE SHIPPING
A True Story of Mouthwash, Puzzles, Waiting, and Bethany.
biotène
DRY MOUTH
Oral Rinse
biotène
DRY MOUTH

It started with mouthwash.

Biotene, to be precise.

There are probably more dignified beginnings for a story.

Mine started with mouthwash.

I knew I wanted Biotene. How much Biotene was an entirely different question.

That's where the game began.



CVS had coupons.

I had ExtraBucks.

I had my monthly ExtraCare Plus reward.

There was a beauty coupon. There were rewards for buying certain quantities. There was free shipping. CVS offers buy-one-get-one deals, buy-one-get-one-50%-off deals, spend-this-much-and-get-that-much-back deals.

They let you stack some of them.

I like this.

Probably too much.



I have always enjoyed figuring out how to get what I want at the best possible price.

It isn't enough for me to know something is a good deal. If there are three different ways to buy it, I want to know which one is the best deal.

The boys have benefited greatly from this character trait.

Wendy's presents an excellent mathematical opportunity.

Suppose a single hamburger costs six dollars, a double seven, and a triple eight. Their patties are quarter-pounders.

The meat market might charge seven dollars a pound for hamburger.

So my mind doesn't see an eight-dollar triple hamburger.

It sees three quarter-pound patties.

For a couple of incremental dollars, Jimmy and Johnny can get half a pound of already-cooked beef, I can keep the rest of the sandwich for myself, and nobody has to cook or wash a frying pan.

Sometimes Wendy's gets confused and the boys wind up with all three patties.

They consider this excellent customer service.



This is how my mind works.

There is nothing inherently wrong with it.

It has probably saved me a great deal of money over the years.

Businesses encourage it.

They have created an entire industry around convincing people like me that there is always one more deal to find.

There is, however, a flaw in my accounting.

A bargain remains a bargain only if I assign no value to the time I spend obtaining it.

I hadn't quite thought about that yet.



I was still buying mouthwash.

After experimenting with quantities and coupons, I had two bottles of mouthwash and two tubes of moisturizing gel in my cart.

$47.96.

Then CVS proudly informed me:

You got free shipping.

And charged me $12.80 for shipping.

I stared at the screen.

Free shipping.

$12.80.

I am an accountant.

I understand that there are branches of mathematics far beyond my abilities.

But I had remained reasonably confident that zero and $12.80 were different numbers.

So I did what I do.

I started solving the puzzle.

Maybe the coupons had dropped the order below the required amount.

I added things.

I removed things.

Shipping changed.

I added gels.

I removed gels.

One bottle of mouthwash could travel to my house for free.

Two bottles apparently required special arrangements.

Three bottles cost $28.40 to ship.

This seemed unreasonable.

So naturally I added ten.

CVS wanted $155.90 to ship them.

At that price, I assumed the mouthwash would arrive with an armed escort.

I pictured a tractor-trailer backing into the driveway.

BEEP.

BEEP.

BEEP.

Johnny would bark.

Jimmy would bark because Johnny was barking.

A man carrying a clipboard would come to the door.

“Hey, Boss.”

“Yeah?”

“Biotene delivery.”

“Just put the pallet beside the garage.”

And somehow CVS continued assuring me:

You got free shipping.



I had discovered a new branch of mathematics.

Free + $155.90 = Free.

At some point something had changed.

I wasn't buying mouthwash anymore.

I was solving a puzzle.

I have always had a little Dr. Gregory House in me.

Not the drugs.

Not the bedside manner.

And certainly not his willingness to put a patient through extraordinary risk simply because he needed to know whether his diagnosis was right.

The puzzle.

For House, the disease could become so fascinating that the patient sometimes seemed almost secondary.

He needed to know why.

I understand that impulse.

Why does one bottle ship free?

Why do two cost $12.80?

Why do three cost $28.40?

Why do ten cost $155.90?

There had to be a rule.

There had to be an explanation.

And I wanted it.

The original objective—buying Biotene—had quietly disappeared.

The puzzle had become the objective.



Eventually I defeated CVS.

One bottle of mouthwash.

Two tubes of gel.

$12.81 after coupons, rewards, and tax.

Free shipping.

Real free shipping.

And CVS was going to give me another $4 in ExtraBucks for buying two Biotene products.

I had been willing to spend approximately fifty dollars.

Through the combined genius of modern marketing, loyalty programs and artificial shipping mathematics, CVS had successfully persuaded me to spend thirteen.

They would now pick my order, box it, ship it to my house for free and give me four dollars to come back.

Victory.



I pressed the button to finish the purchase.

CVS wanted the three-digit security code from the back of my credit card.

The same card CVS already had on file.

The same card I always use.

For a $12.81 transaction.

My wallet was in the car.

Of course it was.

I went to bed.



Or tried to.

Johnny was being a pest.

I don't remember what he wanted.

With Johnny, the absence of a legitimate grievance has never prevented the filing of a complaint.

I put my head on the pillow.

Too warm.

Blanket off.

Too cold.

Blanket on.

Apparently my body had established a one-degree comfort zone.

My mind was wide awake.



And somewhere in all that restlessness came a question:

How can God speak to me when I am never peaceful?

I couldn't even manage stillness while asleep.

Then I thought about Joseph.

God spoke to Joseph in dreams.

Joseph slept.

Apparently even unconsciousness was something a saint could do better than I could.

But Joseph wasn't exactly living a peaceful life when God spoke to him.

Flight.

Egypt.

A child entrusted to him whom he could protect but never completely comprehend.

God did not wait for Joseph's world to become quiet before He entered it.



I lay there.

And I heard the clock.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

It is a mechanical clock.

It ticks all the time.

I almost never hear it.

Then the basement sump pump made its occasional gurgling sound.

A car passed on Route 322.

Jimmy moved.

The house settled.

None of these sounds had suddenly appeared.

They had been there all along.

My mind usually filters them out.

They disappear beneath the business and busyness of life.

But that night I heard them.

Even temperature seemed unusually vivid.

As though one degree separated comfort from discomfort.



And I began wondering:

How many things are always present that I simply no longer hear?

Maybe God doesn't need to become louder.

Maybe I need to become quieter.



Later I would learn that the Hebrew behind “Be still” carries more than the idea of silence.

Raphah can mean to let go, to loosen one's grip, to cease striving.

Maybe stillness isn't an empty mind.

Maybe it isn't the absence of questions.

Maybe it is loosening my grip long enough to let God be God.

Then another thought came.

Biotene.

Why was I spending half the night trying to buy Biotene in the first place?

Radiation.

The treatments left me with dry mouth.

Several times every day I reach for that bottle.

Morning.

Afternoon.

Night.

There is nothing dramatic about it.

Just a bottle beside the sink.

And every time I use it, whether I consciously acknowledge it or not, there is a reminder.

Cancer was here.

And soon there will be another PET scan.

Then comes the waiting.



I know that waiting.

Those strange, numbing days when ordinary life continues around you while one question sits underneath everything.

The dogs still need to be fed.

The grass still grows.

Bills still arrive.

Traffic still passes by.

The clock still ticks.

You laugh.

You eat.

You sleep, or try to.

And somewhere underneath all of it:

Is there cancer or not?

I don't want pity for that.

I don't want to make cancer beautiful.

It isn't.

If someone offered me a complete refund on the experience, I would not ask about the return policy.

There are things I would gladly never have learned.



But there are also truths I cannot make disappear.

Cancer is one of them.

And unlike CVS shipping, cancer presents a puzzle I cannot solve by changing the quantity.

There is no coupon.

No reward combination.

No variable I can manipulate until I get the answer I want.

Eventually I have to wait.



Perhaps that is why my thoughts turned toward patience.

I have said before that I am not a patient man.

Someone once told me never to pray for patience because God doesn't simply give it to you.

He teaches it to you.

I don't know whether theology works quite that neatly.

Perhaps He gives me opportunities to exercise it.

Repeatedly.

Usually when I would prefer He didn't.

Three ripening bananas.

A ridiculous website.

A PET scan.

Ordinary life.



I was lying perfectly still in bed.

But there wasn't anything still about me.

My body was under the covers.

My mind was running around the kitchen.

Calculating.

Revisiting.

Anticipating.

Solving.

And suddenly I thought of a woman in a kitchen.

Martha.

For years I had probably been a little unfair to her.

I heard the story in Luke's Gospel almost as though there were a good sister and a bad sister.

Mary sits at the feet of Jesus and hears His word.

Martha is “busy about much serving.”

Finally the Lord tells her:

“Martha, Martha, thou art careful, and art troubled about many things.”

And then:

“But one thing is necessary. Mary hath chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her.”

But Martha wasn't doing something evil.

She was serving Jesus.

I understand Martha.

There are meals to prepare.

Problems to solve.

Someone has to notice these things.

Martha's problem wasn't that she served Christ.

She became so consumed with serving Him that she nearly missed Christ in the room.

And Mary?

She sat at His feet and listened.



For a man who can spend an hour determining the optimum number of mouthwash bottles in an online shopping cart, Mary can be a little intimidating.

Just sit there?

There must be something that needs to be fixed.

But perhaps I've been making another false choice.

Maybe I don't have to become Mary instead of Martha.

Maybe I need to let Mary and Martha inhabit the same person.

Let Martha work.

Let Martha serve.

But let Mary live there too.

Let Mary occasionally take her sister by the hand and say:

Enough.

He's here.



And then I remembered Lazarus.

The sisters appear again.

Only now their brother is dead.

And something has changed.

Martha—the busy one, the doer—is the one who goes out to meet Jesus while Mary initially remains at home.

Martha doesn't pretend everything is fine.

“Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.”

There is grief in that sentence.

Perhaps even bewilderment.

Where were You?

I understand that question too.



Jesus doesn't reject her question.

He leads her deeper.

“I am the resurrection and the life.”

And Martha—the woman who once became so troubled by many things that she nearly missed Who was sitting in her own house—looks at Him and says:

“Yea, Lord, I have believed that thou art Christ, the Son of the living God, who art come into this world.”

Her brother is still dead. The stone is still across the tomb. Martha doesn't know what Jesus is about to do.

And still:

I have believed.

Not:

I understand.

Not:

I know what happens next.

I have believed.

Then Martha goes home and secretly calls Mary:

“The master is come, and calleth for thee.”

Mary rises quickly and goes to Him.

She falls at His feet.

The place where we first knew her.

But this time she isn't quietly listening.

She is weeping.

And remarkably, Mary says to Jesus the very same words her sister had spoken:

“Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.”

The same words.

But now from Mary.

Perhaps the sisters are beginning to meet one another.







And Jesus sees Mary weeping.

He sees those with her weeping.

He knows what He is about to do.

And still—

“And Jesus wept.”

Those words have always done something to me.

They were the heart of the first song for which I ever wrote lyrics.

And I titled my first album:

And Jesus Wept.

“…For every tear that falls into the night,
A dawn will break where mercy’s arms are wide...”

“…In every sorrow, love’s sweet hope is found.
And Jesus wept; where all the sweet hope is found.”

Perhaps because those three words tell me something I desperately need to know about God.

He does not watch our suffering from a distant throne.

He enters it.

The fact that resurrection is coming does not make today's tears unreal.

Jesus knew what He was about to do at Lazarus's tomb.

And Jesus wept.



There is permission in that.

I don't have to call cancer good.

I don't have to pretend I'm not frightened by uncertainty.

Darkness can actually be dark.

Grief can hurt.

Christian hope does not require us to lie about any of it.

And Jesus wept.



Maybe that's part of why I love the Apostle John so much.

I confess to an affectionate jealousy of him.

John got so close. So close! Apart from St. Joseph, I can hardly imagine another man whose earthly life was so intimately bound to both Jesus and Mary.

I cannot help contemplating that John was close enough to hear the beating of the Sacred Heart. I would love to be that close.

And years later, in the vision recorded in Revelation, John encountered the glorified Christ.

The disciple who had once reclined against His breast now saw His glory and wrote:

“And when I had seen him, I fell at his feet as dead.”

And Christ laid His right hand upon him.

“Fear not.”



Intimacy had not destroyed awe.

John had known the human closeness of Jesus and the overwhelming glory of Christ.

And somehow, through it all, John seems to have learned something I spend much of my life struggling to learn.

How to remain close.

How to abide.

I solve.

I calculate.

I fix.

John abides.

I would like some of that.

Not instead of the mind God gave me.

Not instead of Martha.

Alongside her.

Maybe Mary and Martha can inhabit the same person.

And perhaps John can teach us all where to remain.



Then I thought again about something that has troubled me for a long time.

Sometimes I seem to have both feet firmly planted in ordinary life.

Money.

Repairs.

Doctors.

Bills.

Mouthwash.

Ordinary things.

Recovery from radiation has changed the arithmetic.

A simple task can consume much of my energy for the day.

And it can become the day's accomplishment.

Sometimes I feel as though I have one foot in ordinary life and one foot in the Sacred.

Prayer.

Scripture.

Church.

God.

But rarely, if ever, do I feel as though I have both feet in the Sacred.

I have wondered what that would even be like.

Perhaps I have been imagining it incorrectly.



Recently I stood at the highest point of my property, where railroad tracks once ran.

I looked down toward the land that floodwaters had recently engulfed.

Then I lifted my eyes above my house.

Toward the heavens.



Perhaps I have been doing something similar with God.

Looking upward.

Imagining that the Sacred is someplace else.

Somewhere beyond the bills and PET scans.

Somewhere the questions already have answers.

Somewhere I am finally peaceful.

But God did not remain somewhere else.

The Word became flesh.

Christ entered ordinary human life.

A home.

A meal.

A wedding.

Friendship.

Sickness.

Grief.

Death.



And what Christ entered, He did not leave untouched.

Perhaps I've been drawing the boundary in the wrong place.

Martha's kitchen wasn't keeping her from the Sacred.

Christ was sitting in her kitchen.

Human tears were not beneath Him.

He wept them.

Maybe this room is not outside the Sacred either.

The mechanical clock.

The sump pump.

Traffic on Route 322.

A restless dachshund.

A bottle of Biotene.

A PET scan approaching on the calendar.

Maybe there aren't two separate lives—one ordinary and one Sacred.

Maybe there is only the life I have been given.

And Christ has entered it.



I realized something else.

All evening I had been thinking CVS was wasting my time.

But CVS could not take my time.

I had given it.

They built the game.

I chose to keep playing.

There is nothing wrong with a bargain or a puzzle, or with using the mind God gave me.

But gifts can become masters.

The bargain ceases to be a bargain when the one thing I refuse to price is my own life.



And right now that price is especially high.

An hour isn't merely an hour.

It can be the day.

Attention has value.

Peace has value.

The person beside me has value.

The dog pestering me has value.

Perhaps even an unfinished problem has value if it teaches me that not everything has to be solved.

Some things are problems.

Some things are mysteries.

Problems ask for answers.

Mysteries ask us to remain.



Maybe that's what they knew.

Maybe that's what I am learning too.

Slowly.

Very slowly.

The PET scan will come.

Then the answer.

Perhaps it will be the answer I want.

Perhaps there will be another puzzle I cannot solve.

I don't know.

And for once, perhaps those three words can remain unfinished:

I don't know.

Martha didn't know what Jesus was about to do either.

Her brother was still behind the stone.

And she said:

“Yea, Lord, I have believed.”

I would like to be able to say that.



I may never possess the quiet trust of Joseph.

I may never approach the fiat of the Blessed Mother.

But perhaps those aren't reasons for despair.

Perhaps today I can let Mary and Martha inhabit the same man.

Martha can still calculate the cheapest way to feed Jimmy and Johnny.

She's good at it.

Mary can remind her when it's time to stop.

John can teach us all to abide.

And when darkness comes, I can remember that Christ does not observe it from somewhere far away.

He enters it.

To Him be the glory and honor.

The End



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