Waiting for the Call

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Growing up in Eldred Taylor’s household, I vacillated between adulation and resentment. It’s not easy to live with someone who knows he is right and knows it because God told him. I liked being so closely affiliated with the power center. When he walked into the church service on Sunday morning wearing his dark blue suit, a red rosebud pinned on his lapel, his well-worn Bible tucked under his arm, he was a handsome and powerful sight. Often after he sat down, while the organist continued to play, he would look out over the congregation. When his eyes came to rest on me, he would wink, claiming me. After church, he would stand at the back of the sanctuary and shake the hand of everyone who came out his door. He would stand and talk until everyone was gone but the janitor. When the crowd was pretty well thinned out, I would walk up beside him. Without pausing in his conversation, he would reach out and put his arm around me, pulling me close. Claimed again.

But the constraints of that preacher’s daughter role were real and wearying. By the time I got to high school, I knew I had some substantive differences of opinion with him on the right and wrong of a number of things. The first big theological difference came when I was about eleven. Jeannie and I were getting ready for bed. Daddy stopped in to tell us good
night, and I chose that moment to question him about salvation. We had been taught that if you were going to be saved from eternal damnation you had to accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior. The absolute nature of this requirement had begun to worry me. “But what about,” I asked, “people in some part of the world where no one has ever heard of Jesus? What about them?”

“They would go to hell,” my father explained. “That’s why we have to work so hard to make sure everyone has a chance to hear.”

“But that’s not fair,” I argued, bursting into tears. “If God doesn’t send someone to tell them, how can God send them to hell? I can’t believe that’s right.”

My father reminded me again of how important it was for us to tell the good news to everyone we could so this wouldn’t happen. But I knew in my heart that Daddy and I had parted ways. I dried my tears. God could not possibly be that rigid, that dead set on a Jesus-only route to heaven.

Of course, just as Daddy feared, once you admit one chink in the theological armor, the whole outfit threatens to fall to pieces. Baptists attract a fair amount of ridicule for their long list of don’ts. We weren’t allowed to dance, drink, smoke, bring playing cards into the house, say “gosh” or “gee,” or go to a picture show on Sunday. All of these restrictions are based on the notion that Baptists are by and large an intemperate lot and once they get started with something they just can’t hold back. We weren’t allowed to dance because when a man holds a woman close in his arms he gets all worked up and inflamed, and the next thing you know she’s pregnant. We weren’t allowed to drink because after one sip you might not stop, and the next thing you know you’re an alcoholic. We couldn’t smoke because it was an addiction and one that didn’t look very Christian. We couldn’t have playing cards in the house because playing cards are used for gambling. First poker and then, before you can say “I’ll see you and raise you two,” you’re down at the racetrack betting on the Kentucky Derby and drinking mint juleps in the middle of the afternoon. Saying “gosh” or “gee” is just a step away from saying “God” or “Jesus,” which is taking the Lord’s name in vain (as specifically prohibited in the Ten Commandments). Going to a movie (what we called “the show”) on Sunday gets in the way of remembering the Sabbath to keep it holy, which you cannot do while watching a picture show. We couldn’t work
on Sunday either, though somehow pastoring the church didn’t count. Neither did doing the Sunday dishes. You could even sew a button on if it was for something you needed to wear to church. Even the Old Testament granted a few special exceptions for that “no breaking the Sabbath” rule. After all, sometimes the ox was in the ditch, and the poor old thing had to be hauled out so it would stop bellowing.

By the time I got to high school, I didn’t buy most of this. The idea behind all these prohibitions, I suppose, is the one contained in I Thessalonians 5:22: “Abstain from all appearance of evil.” That directive cuts a mighty wide swath.

Not dancing was the hardest. Jeannie and I wanted to dance so bad. We watched American Bandstand and worked on our dance floor technique in the living room with the television on. We practiced as best we could and dreamed of the day when we could get out there and cut the rug with the best of them. We were about as adept at this as most white Southern Baptists who have been discouraged all their lives from contacting any body parts that might wiggle or sway.

The high school regularly organized sock hops. These informal dances were the major form of social life available outside of football and basketball games. You didn’t even have to have a date to go. Girls could go in groups with their friends. I believed that if I could go to the sock hops my social isolation would end. Friends urged me on. Even the girls whose daddies were deacons were allowed to dance. When I was a sophomore, I became convinced that there was a way out of this dilemma. I thought long and hard about it, planning what I would say, and then one morning I marched into my father’s study to present my proposal.

“Daddy, can I talk to you?” I asked as I knocked on his door.

“Sure, honey, come in.” He laid aside the exegetical text he was studying in preparation for next Sunday’s sermon and the notes he was taking.

“Daddy, I know you and Mother think dancing is wrong.” I swallowed hard and took a deep breath. “But I’ve been thinking a lot about this, and I don’t agree with you. I realize that if I were to go to the dance as your daughter people in this town would be critical of you. But here’s what I’m thinking. I’m not you, and we don’t agree. So what I thought was this. I can go to the sock hop as myself.”
He fixed me with a baffled look. I barreled on recklessly.

“T’d just go as myself. If anyone asked what you thought, I’d tell them you didn’t agree with me but that I was there as myself. Not as your daughter.”

He gave me a kindly smile, with just a pinch of long-suffering indulgence thrown in. “Jackie, honey, I don’t think there’s any point in our talking about this. You know your mother’s and my position on dancing. We don’t believe it is right. If you go to a dance in this town, it reflects badly on you and it reflects badly on our family. I’m sorry you don’t agree with us on this, but I have to say no.”

A wave of helplessness and humiliation washed over me. A hot blush crept up my neck and spread over my face. I felt like my circuits were seconds away from meltdown. “OK, then,” I muttered quickly as I hurriedly backed out of his study. I was dizzy, and my head was growing lighter. I rushed to my bedroom just as my vision, in slow motion, began to dim, as if someone were dialing down the lights on a rheostat. Everything faded to black. A few minutes later I found myself on the floor of my bedroom regaining consciousness from the second grand mal epileptic seizure of my life.

The first had occurred during Sunday morning service when I was eight. My mother had frowned at me because she had caught me whispering in church. I wasn’t really being disruptive, and I thought Mother’s stern censure unfair. A mixture of shame and indignation washed through me. When I stiffened and fell, one of the men of the church carried me out. My father, who didn’t see who had fallen, prayed for the family of the sick child who had left the service. Mother followed me out and took me home. She had seen my jaw working during the seizure and diagnosed the problem before they hooked me up to the first EEG. She knew from experience the metallic taste I had in my mouth when I came to, and she knew that a sip of Coca-Cola would chase it away.

Like my mother, I seemed to have some pretty sensitive wiring. For years during my childhood I took medication to control the epilepsy that was diagnosed after that first seizure, and for years I was cautioned to lie down (“Hit the deck!” my doctor would bark) whenever the lights started to dim. I was warned not to reveal to any of my friends that I suffered from this highly stigmatized condition. It was, I felt then, just one more way I
was different. By my sophomore year, the epilepsy was almost outgrown, and I had eased off the medication, but the sense of helplessness and injustice I felt when my father vetoed my plan to show up as myself swamped my system.

In that moment, when I stood in my father’s study, seeking a path out of the clearly demarcated world of right and wrong he had constructed, it felt as if everything was at stake: my parents’ love, my independence, my chance for love and romance, any hope of ever having meaningful connections beyond my family. I grew increasingly impatient with my parents’ simple rules, yet I loved them fiercely and wanted to do what was in my power to help them look good.

By the end of my senior year, I had managed to make one good friend who was not a Baptist. Sally was Presbyterian. She was magnificently unimpressed by my father. She seemed, somehow, to like me for myself, and she regarded my preacher’s daughter condition as an unfortunate circumstance that I could not help and for which I should be pitied but not ostracized.

*Bonnie and Clyde*, the Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty film about two notorious bank robbers, had come out nearly two years earlier. At last it had made its way to Somerset. When I mentioned to my father that I wanted to see it, he told me that it was a film that glorified a life of violence and contained too much sex and that it would not be an appropriate film for me to see. End of subject.

Sally decided to throw a birthday party for one of her friends. The party would begin with a barbecue in her backyard, and then we would all go together to *Bonnie and Clyde*. I told her my father would never let me see that movie. Sally laughed at the very thought of such a ridiculous position. She was sure he could not object to my going with a bunch of girls. I was equally certain that he could. But, fortified by Sally’s gentle prodding, I resolved to take him on.

I told my father that we needed to talk. We sat down together in the living room with the two big picture windows and the window seat, he in the upholstered rocking chair with the gooseneck arms and I on the couch with the new slipcover Mrs. Tandy had made. This slipcover had roses that matched the mauve beige carpet and walls. It was a sunny weekday afternoon in May. I don’t know how I managed to catch him at
home on a weekday afternoon, a time when he was usually out visiting
church members who were in the hospital. But there we sat across from
each other, he in his suit and tie and I in the poly-cotton skirt I had made
myself and hemmed a good two inches shorter than he and Mother
thought looked decent.

“Sally’s having a birthday party for Debbie that I really want to
attend,” I began.

“That sounds like fun.”

“She’s going to have a barbecue in her backyard, and then we are all
going to go down to the movie theater to see Bonnie and Clyde.”

My father frowned impatiently. “Jackie, we’ve already covered this.
That movie is not appropriate. I can’t permit you to go. Bonnie and Clyde
is a trashy, vulgar film that glorifies a life of violence and glamorizes sex
outside of marriage.”

I was anxious, of course, and yet, in some way, strangely calm. I was
enough my father’s daughter to be fearless when I believed I held the
moral high ground. Words filled my mouth. “That’s possible,” I said.
“But I’m going anyway. This is my rebellion. For eleven years, ever since
we got to Somerset, I’ve followed every one of your rules and done every-
thing in my power to make you look good. I understood that everyone
was watching us and our every action reflected on you. Preachers’ kids
are supposed to be rebels and troublemakers but not us. Jeannie and I
have been veritable Baptist nuns. I haven’t always agreed with you, but
I’ve always tried to make you look good. Now I’m three months away
from leaving home for college. Once I get there, it will be up to me to
make decisions about where I go and what movies I see. So far, I’ve made
all these decisions based on your beliefs. Once I get to college that’s over.
At college, what I do reflects on me and me alone. I can tell you right now,
once I get there, I’m going to go where I decide to go and do what I
decide to do. I’m cutting loose.”

My father had the good sense not to interrupt me as I barreled on. “If
you’ve done such a poor job of raising me that ninety minutes in a movie
theater is going to cause me to take up a life of crime, then there’s no hope
anyway. I’m not convinced that Bonnie and Clyde is the wicked film you
think it is, but even if it is I don’t think it’s going to turn me into a bank
robber. I’m going to go see that film, and you can’t stop me. This is my
rebellion. And here’s the beauty of this rebellion. No one will even guess that I’m rebelling but you. Anyone who sees me there with a gang of girlfriends will just figure I’m celebrating my friend’s birthday. So your reputation can remain untarnished. I’m going to that movie, and you can’t stop me. But I wanted you to know.”

At last I paused and Daddy got a chance to speak. “Jackie,” he said gravely, “I know you’ve worked hard to follow the rules that your mother and I set forth and that it hasn’t always been easy for you. We really appreciate how hard you and Jeannie have tried to follow the teachings and principles we have provided. I also respect what you have said to me this afternoon, and of course I don’t believe that watching Bonnie and Clyde will make a criminal of you.” He stood up and walked to the middle of the room.

“Come over here to your Daddy,” he said. When I approached, he reached out his arm and pulled me close to his side. “I’m so proud of you. I still don’t think you ought to see this film, and I’m not going to give you my permission. In fact, if I did give you my permission it would ruin your rebellion. But I understand and respect what you have said to me this afternoon. So, if you do decide to go to this movie against my will, I will accept, even if I do not condone, your decision.”

When you stop to think about it, it was a puny rebellion indeed. Like I said, just between us. No one else even knew about it except, perhaps, Mother. Still, standing up to him even this much had felt to me like an act of raw courage. And I had given him fair warning. I was fixing to kick over the traces. My days as an overachieving, Goody Two-shoes, Baptist nun were drawing to a close.