Waiting for the Call
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I pulled the 1958 two-toned Chevrolet into the Ramseys’ driveway on Friday night, turned off the ignition, stepped out, and pocketed the key with something approaching a swagger. I had been driving for only a year and couldn’t quite get over the stroke of good fortune that had placed in my possession, if only for two weeks, this ten-year-old, green and white beauty in mint condition.

I was staying with Bill and Eula Ramsey because my father was in Owensboro preaching a revival, Jeannie was away at college, and my mother, recovering from a hysterectomy and still too weak to manage on her own, was in the care of Opal Gay, another church member and friend. The two had sealed their friendship with a multitude of blackberry-picking sessions, sessions that gave them a chance to discover their shared love of the natural world and their similarly irreverent senses of humor. Mother seemed to be doing better than anyone could have expected. She was amazingly optimistic and energetic for someone so recently out of surgery. In a burst of relief and creativity, she had written a poem, “Joy at Dawn.” Her poem described her laughing, crying, talking to the birds and to God. “No! I was not drunk / Only filled with God’s Spirit,” the poem explained.
Mother clearly felt lucky to be alive. She looked out from her hospital bed at the sunrise with a surge of emotion that was almost overwhelming. If we had seen this poem then, we would have thought that anyone who could write verse only a week or so after surgery that rose to such a crescendo of exclamation points and rhymed and scanned so well must surely be on the road to recovery. Daddy undoubtedly believed that her powerful faith was sufficient to sustain her through anything life could offer.

For me, the past five days had bestowed a giddy freedom. Our family had only one car, an Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight. I drove it seldom, generally when my parents needed me to run an errand. I walked to school and every other place I needed to go. So I was thrilled to have the keys to the Ramseys’ old Chevy. Brother Ramsey was one of our deacons. But here we were blessedly spared weekday morning Bible readings and devotions. They didn’t even have a blessing at breakfast, a surprisingly relaxed affair. We just wandered in and helped ourselves to cereal or toast or whatever.

Like my mother, Mrs. Ramsey was a great cook and an exuberant cutup. She was glad to see me when I came home, but I felt none of the tension and conflict that had come to characterize my relationship with my own mother. She had, for instance, no interest at all in how short my skirts were. She didn’t seem to mind if I was sleepy or preoccupied rather than animated and cheerful at breakfast. She didn’t even have an opinion on my posture.

Brother Ramsey, probably in his fifties by then and bald, was a tall, kind, handsome, blue-eyed man. They were fun, they weren’t my parents, and they had given me a shiny vintage car to drive.

I was on the committee busily planning the senior prom, one I would never attend. Eldred Taylor’s prominence in the community and implacable opposition to dancing had made me virtually date-proof. A tall, bony, bookish girl, I carried around a list of novels our English teacher told us we should read before college and carefully checked off each one as I completed it. I loved them all. When I finished the list, I searched out other books by the same authors. I raised my hand before anyone else in my trigonometry class and helped the boys with their homework. I shared my ideas freely and was profligate with unsolicited
advice and opinions. All told, I was a walking compendium of behaviors designed to guarantee social oblivion.

But, during that week Daddy was away at the revival, as I worked on the prom committee, selecting the theme, planning the decorations, and then driving myself home in “my” two-toned ’58 Chevy, I felt, in my borrowed life, almost like an ordinary teenager. That night I lay in bed reading *Jane Eyre* until well past eleven. No one told me to turn off my light. I was free. But not for long.

On Saturday morning at 6:15, Eula Ramsey called me out of a sound sleep. It took me a minute to figure out where I was. Mrs. Ramsey was telling me something about my mother, but it didn’t make any sense. My mother was having problems (what kind of problems?), and someone (Opal Gay? The doctor? Mrs. Ramsey?) wanted me to go help her. My mother, ten days postsurgery, was having some kind of mental breakdown. She was talking nonstop, and much of what she said made no sense. The family doctor had been by, but he couldn’t seem to get her calmed down. Mrs. Gay had called in church friends from down the road, Allen and Dixie Davis (another deacon and his wife), but no one could figure out how to help Mother. The adults had run out of ideas, and someone had decided that if Mother could see me she might settle down and come to herself.

I was out the door within five minutes. I remember asking questions, trying to get clear on what was happening. I remember feeling hyperalert. Mother was in trouble. I could help her.

Looking back on that day, I wonder what the adults thought a seventeen year old with exactly zero experience dealing with psychotic breakdowns would have to offer. I’ve always been a can-do, take-charge kind of person. I don’t seem to inspire protective impulses. But still I can’t imagine that my scrawny, stoop-shouldered, teenage self looked equal to the job of facing a mother who had gone wildly, ravingly, extravagantly mad. Only overwhelming panic and a powerful belief that this was family business could have led them to pin their hopes on me.

When I walked into the little bedroom right off Opal’s tiny kitchen, Mother was sitting up in bed shouting, “Damn! Damn! Damn!” At the conclusion of this string of the only curses I had ever heard pass my mother’s lips, she flopped back on the bed shrieking with laughter. She

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*Six-Track Mind*
caught sight of me, and a look of zany delight spread over her face. “Oh, here’s Jackie. Now don’t worry, honey. You probably don’t know what to think seeing your mother like this.” I didn’t. I felt raw terror. Up until this point, my family, and especially my mother, had seemed a safe harbor in the midst of a public life in which I often felt like an odd bird and an outsider. Now my mother, certainly a bit prone to mood swings but always, before, my mother, looked and sounded like a crazy person. I was horrified. But my conviction that I had to find a way to take care of her was far stronger than even my terror. “Damn! Damn! Damn!” she shouted again, with the exuberance of someone who had been biting back curses for forty-seven years. She once again fell back laughing.

I went into the room and gave her a hug. She looked like herself and yet not. She was my big, beautiful, familiar, wonderful mother. And she wasn’t. She wore one of her pretty pastel nylon gowns. It had a row of buttons down the front of the scooped neck, a neckline that showed several inches of her ample cleavage. But a large safety pin firmly fastened the top of the gown. What’s more, a plain cotton print robe, surely borrowed from Opal, was pinned around her shoulders.

Mother weighed about 150 pounds by this time, a good 20 pounds more than her ideal weight. She always prided herself on the fact that no matter what her weight she maintained her beautiful proportions (defined by her as a matching measurement of bust and hips and a waist that was ten inches smaller). Her long, shapely legs remained, at any weight or age, one of her finest points. But 150 pounds was more weight than she wanted, and she had been dieting in the weeks before the surgery. The doctor had given her a prescription for amphetamines, a common practice at the time. Women all over America were prescribed these drugs as a diet aid.

By the time I saw her, she must have been a chemical and hormonal stew. The amphetamines and the stress would have revved her up. She was still recovering from the anesthesia. She was also given painkillers after the hysterectomy, Demerol in the hospital and later some other prescription drugs. She had been plunged abruptly into menopause with the hysterectomy, a plunge uncushioned by hormone replacement therapy. We now know that these circumstances can send any woman into an
emotional and physical tailspin, even one who does not suffer from mental illness. But we didn’t know any of that then.

Her brown, softly permed hair showed the wear and tear of ten days in bed. She moved with that special caution anyone tender and sore from abdominal surgery takes. But it was her face that showed the greatest strain. She looked wild around her eyes and terribly anxious. At the same time, she looked electrically charged—superalert. I sat on her bed, and we held hands as she talked and talked and talked about everything that had ever bothered her in her life. Her mind leaped from one topic to the next in a bizarre sort of stream of consciousness.

As for me, I was both deeply frightened and strangely calm. I felt catapulted into adulthood, not into the fun parts, like driving your own car and reading as late into the night as you liked, but the scary, hard parts, where you’re in charge but no one has shown you what it is you are supposed to do next. Where maybe no one really knows.

She stroked my hand. “Your hand is so warm. Poor little Jeannie has such cold, sweaty hands. They have an operation they can do now where they cut the nerve, so your hands don’t sweat so much. I wonder if Jeannie should have that operation. She has such clammy little hands.” My sister was nearly six feet tall, and there was nothing little about her hands, but Mother always used little as a term of endearment. “I don’t know how much it would cost to get an operation like that or whether they even do it in Somerset.”

“Poor little Eldred, he works so hard. People think we live on Easy Street because he drives a great big Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight and we live in a great big house. We don’t live on Easy Street, we live on Main Street, and the traffic goes by night and day.”

She plucked at the opening of her gown. “They pinned this up,” she told me mischievously. “They’re afraid I won’t keep it buttoned.” And she laughed with glee and fidgeted with the pin. “Just leave that alone. You’re fine,” Dixie Davis instructed from beside the bed. Opal and Dixie were hovering in and out of the bedroom, making another pot of coffee on Opal’s little stove, opening or closing the windows, conferring quietly in the adjacent living room. Allen Davis had gone back down the road to tend to his livestock. The doctor had come and gone before I arrived.
Mother had awakened at three in the morning. She often had trouble sleeping, and it was not unusual for her to get up as much as two hours before her usual 6:00 am, but this was different. She had begun pacing anxiously around the house, asking for my dad, begging to go home, and becoming more and more upset and incoherent. As she grew wilder, she talked more and more rapidly and disjointedly. Soon, the cursing started, and then, after Dr. Spraddlin and Allen and Dixie Davis arrived, she began ripping open the front of her nightgown and flashing her big, beautiful breasts at the family doctor, the startled deacon, and her two good friends. Mother was an extremely modest woman. She had probably never flashed so much as a petticoat up until that day. Dr. Spraddlin, who had cared for her for years, and Allen, Dixie, and Opal, who thought they knew her well, must have been astonished.

She was wild with anxiety and didn’t want to stay in bed. She became belligerent. She refused the capsules the doctor offered. She paced and ranted. Finally, forcibly, Dr. Spraddlin injected her with what he described as enough tranquilizer to knock out a horse, but she was unfazed. By the time I arrived, just before seven, Dr. Spraddlin had run out of ideas and headed off to see his other patients. Opal and Dixie had persuaded Marjorie to get back in bed and pinned her gown securely shut. But her mind was still racing.

Now she was talking about her parents, how hard they always worked, how little they had, how short they were, how tall she was, how she towered over them, her sister, and two of her four brothers. She talked about how the older brothers and sister had teased her. “Stick your chest out, Marjorie,” she said with a laugh and reached again for the top of the gown, but it was pinned tight. “Stick your chest out, Marjorie.”

Now I got it. Mother had told me this story many times before. Whenever she slumped, her mama would say, “Stick your chest out, Marjorie.” One day, when she was about nine or ten, her mama said this in front of Marjorie’s older brother. He roared with laughter. “Mama,” he said, “don’t be telling her to stick her chest out. She doesn’t have any chest to stick out.”

At that moment, Mother realized that her flat little-girl chest was going to grow breasts. She was embarrassed by her older brother’s laughter but secretly delighted at the discovery that she would someday have a
woman’s chest. This idea had never occurred to her in a family so gripped with Victorianism that they called the chicken breasts white meat and the legs dark meat rather than speak the words breast and leg at the dinner table.

Because I knew all this, I knew Mother was not irrationally flashing the hapless church members. She was acting out her mama’s instructions as she had understood them. But now, relieved of inhibition by the wild spell that had her in its grip, she was acting those instructions out with a certain gleeful celebration of the fact that, all these years later, she unequivocally and emphatically had a chest to stick out. When I asked Opal and Dixie, I learned that she had indeed shouted “Stick your chest out, Marjorie!” as she flashed her breasts again and again at her horrified friends.

That same eerie juxtaposition of madness and truth characterized most (maybe all, if I’d known every referent) of what she said through that long day. I held her hand. I listened to her stories or fragments of stories or rantings that pointed toward stories. It almost made sense, but it was too much, too fast, too out of control. The inhibitions and conventions that ruled Mother’s life had fallen away. She was speeding wildly down a winding mountain road without brakes. I felt like I was watching some sort of race car that was headed toward the inevitable four-car pileup.

Someone called Daddy that morning. Since the doctors didn’t understand what was going on, he understood even less. As near as they could tell, the combination of the hysterectomy and the drugs had sent Mother over the edge. The doctor told Daddy his wife was having some sort of nervous breakdown.

The revival was scheduled to end the next day, but Daddy came home that afternoon. One of the men from the church flew across the state in his small plane to pick my father up. Two of the deacons drove down to preach the remaining three messages. On Sunday night, after the final service, they would drive his car back from Owensboro. All this took time to arrange, and through it all Mother raved and ranted on.

At about 2:00 pm, Mother began to complain that her mouth was dry. We gave her water, but it didn’t seem to help. “Jackie, feel my tongue,” she instructed me. “It’s like a big old thick piece of cotton.” She stuck out her tongue in my direction and gave me a no-nonsense look. In the
upside-down world she inhabited, examining your mother’s saliva production by taking hold of her tongue was the most ordinary thing in the world. I reached up and touched her tongue. There wasn’t a speck of spit on it. She had a most amazing case of cotton mouth. “It’s as dry as a bone,” I agreed. “You have no spit whatsoever. Not a speck.”

“I want a cup of coffee. Would you go in there and fix me one?” “Coffee?” I thought. Mother was still as speedy as a rocket. But she had been racing for nearly twelve hours, and the doctor’s medicines had dried up nothing but her spit.

“What can it hurt?” I said. “I don’t think her motors could race any faster. If she wants coffee, let’s give her coffee. Her mouth is bone dry.”

I fixed a cup of instant coffee with one saccharin pill, measuring the coffee with a slightly rounded teaspoon, as I had been taught to do. I brought the steaming cup back to Marjorie, and she drank it with relish. “Oh, that tastes good.” She smiled her approval at me. “You know just how I like my coffee.” She turned to her friends. “Jackie makes my coffee just the way I like it,” she said proudly. “She always knows just how to make my coffee.” You would have thought making a cup of instant coffee was some rare skill, the mastery of which was proof positive of my amazing talents.

Almost immediately, as if the coffee contained some magic potion that could quiet troubled minds, she began to calm down. The speeding slowed and then stopped. Her agitated face began to resume its normal expression. “Whoowee, I’m feeling better now. That must have worried you, honey,” she said to me with a squeeze of my hand and a pat. “I was on a roller coaster. My mind was flying down six tracks at once.” My heart swelled. I could have wept for joy to see her coming back, delivered back into herself by the cup of coffee that she had somehow known to ask for and I had somehow known to give her. The relief I felt at helping in even a small way, after hours of helplessly watching her race and rant, was vast.

It had been an exhausting ordeal, and within a half hour of drinking the coffee Mother was fast asleep. Opal and Dixie and I sat in the living room. We could see Mother through the bedroom door. We repeated what she had said and went back over the events of the day, but we really didn’t know what to make of it. We were just so glad to see her quiet at last.
She slept for three hours. By the time she woke, Daddy was home. He must have been wild with worry. Nothing short of a full-blown emergency could have pried him away from the final meetings of a revival, but he projected his usual calm, capable demeanor. He walked into Opal’s small farmhouse and enfolded his wife in a big, warm hug. He spoke to her in a soft, gentle voice. She beamed with pleasure at the sight of him. She apologized for all the fuss and for interrupting his revival. Looking at her now, Daddy could not possibly imagine what we had lived through over the past twelve hours.

Daddy gathered us up, and we headed for the parsonage. Someone must have driven us, since we had no car in town, but I remember nothing of the ride or who was at the wheel. We were used to the support of a dedicated core of church members who would step up to help in any crisis. Even a privately piloted plane didn’t seem that unusual. Mother was weak and tired, a little confused, and very embarrassed, but she seemed like herself. It had been a horrific journey, but it was over. It was a bizarre aberration, an anomaly, a reaction to the trauma of surgery and the drugs.

Except that it wasn’t.

At Bill and Eula’s, I had enjoyed a delicious taste of what I thought of as normal teenage life. I desperately wanted to prolong it. I redoubled my efforts on the prom planning committee as the meetings gave me a reason to stay out of the house. I put in extra hours working on the yearbook. I invented excuses for visiting the library.

Meanwhile, Mother fought for balance. The newest incision gradually healed into one more wide, pink, abdominal scar crisscrossing her craggy belly. Soon she returned to running the household. But her mind would not stop racing.

She became convinced that some of the folks from out in the country who drove into town on Saturdays to shop, parked in front of our house, and sometimes picnicked in our front yard, were spies. Urgently she pointed out anyone who appeared in front of our house more than once and then anyone who lingered at all. She advised us to call the police. The house, she believed, was bugged. She suspected that any time Daddy and I stepped out of earshot to speak to each other we were talking about her. (In fact, because of our concern, this was often true.)

She objected to my busy schedule, convinced that I was working too
hard. She urged me to rest when I could plainly see it was she who was exhausted. Gently, firmly, sometimes angrily, I would insist that I was needed elsewhere, then feel guilty at the relief that flooded me when I escaped the house.

It was a bit more than a year before I could leave for college. I studied the slick college brochures that arrived in the mail as I had once studied the materials from the Foreign Mission Board. I couldn’t wait to begin my own life, one that I was certain would include less church and more books.

In moments of clarity, Mother would count the number of preacher’s wives in our county who had suffered nervous breakdowns. She knew it was not coincidental that the number was in the double digits. Someone, she thought, and I thought with her, might want to look at how the pressures of her life contributed to her illness.

That same summer, about three months after her hysterectomy, Mother was hospitalized with what the doctors diagnosed as a mild heart attack. I was away from home when it happened, working on the kitchen staff at Cedarmore, a Kentucky Baptist summer camp. As before, I was in a state of near bliss, living in a dorm underneath the dining room with the other female staffers, mooning around with my first boyfriend, another staffer, and lounging by the pool between meal shifts. Once more I was called to Mother’s side. Jeannie and I were catapulted into a seemingly endless round of laundry, meals, and dishes as we struggled to take care of the house. Daddy’s schedule was, as it had always been, unaccommodating.

Our family had planned for over two years to travel to Europe and Israel in July and early August. Some twenty people, many of them church members, had signed up to take this twenty-one-day tour under Daddy’s direction. Yet two weeks before we were to leave, Mother was still in the hospital.

Daddy was reluctant to go, worried that Mother would need him, but she insisted that she was fine and he should leave. The psychological symptoms that had plagued her throughout the spring seemed to have abated. Mentally and emotionally, she appeared to be her old comforting, comfortable self. The doctor assured Daddy that he could travel if he needed to, and he needed to. I hated to leave her there. Much as I had
looked forward to my first international trip, it did not seem right to go with her lying in the hospital, just barely back on her feet after the health trials of the spring. I offered to stay behind, but in the end my parents said go, and so we left.

On the trip, Daddy assumed his customary role of leader. He wore an odd little hat to protect his bald head from the sun and would lead our group of twenty or so by striding before us, his hat held high so we could follow him in a crowd. With our group, he was cheerful and confident, but when the bus stopped rolling at the end of the day he was often lonesome and worried about his wife.

Mother and Daddy wrote to each other throughout the trip. The letters provide a record of care and connection. From La Guardia International Airport in New York, Daddy sent a postcard of the Statue of Liberty.

It was hard to leave you this A.M., but everything is all right here and I am sure it will be with you too. You were so pretty and sweet and your wonderful faith is an inspiration and testimony for God. . . . We love you dearly.

Mother’s first letter described the many church members who had visited her in the hospital and the various gifts they had brought. She wrote that she was feeling better and had slept well: “Maybe I will become a useful citizen, church-member, and wife and mother again some day. I still HOPE!”

“You are all of that now,” Daddy replied. In the fifteen letters Daddy wrote to Mother and the eight she wrote to him, there are many references to her health but not a hint of the dark cloud of mental confusion and paranoia that had shadowed the previous months.

We still had no name for what had happened to Mother that spring and no real notion of how to treat it. By the time she was hospitalized with heart trouble, she had seemed normal mentally, yet she felt as if the ground was crumbling beneath her feet. She would come to characterize “that year I was so sick” as one in which first her femininity and sexuality, then her mind, and finally her body gave way. Behind the sunny bits of news, liberal sprinkling of exclamation points, and plucky expressions of hope that she would again become a “productive citizen, church mem-
ber, wife, and mother” lay a deep fear that she would not. Each time she climbed out of what we began to describe as one of her “episodes” we hoped we were free of them.

But Daddy began making notes. This was a man who budgeted the family finances and tracked expenses down to the last cent, who carefully catalogued each typed and dated sermon in three-ring binders, who labeled and catalogued the books in his home library according to the Dewey decimal system. Now he began recording the onset and duration of each of Mother’s episodes. They recurred three to four times a year, often coincident with the change of the seasons. She was not, as he would remark from time to time, out of the woods yet.

Mother was forty-seven in 1968, when all that I have described happened. Her mother had died in 1962 after two agonizing years in which her circulation became so poor that she had to have first one and then the other leg amputated. Mother was her baby and, I believe, her favorite. That same year, although I knew nothing of it then, Mother experienced such a profound depression that she sought counseling. That seems unremarkable now, but it was unusual in that time and place.

By 1968, Mother feared her world was coming apart. She had built her life on making a home for her family and being a good Christian wife and mother. She had brought to this work her considerable intelligence and enormous creativity. But the world she found herself in was not the world she was raised to expect. She felt her looks fading. She noticed that shopkeepers no longer raced to wait on her. She had grown up with clear notions of what being a lady involved, but she couldn’t seem to interest Jeannie and me in the lessons she had struggled to acquire and now wished to impart. The world was growing increasingly angry and unpredictable. She was disturbed by the protests over the war in Vietnam, the growing militance of the civil rights movement, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

In the midst of all this, I imagined her longing for me to live a life full of the freedoms and opportunities she had been denied. She had wanted to be a writer, a painter, a country dweller, and a mother of four sturdy children. Her intelligence, I believed, was greater than my father’s, her creativity far beyond his. I wondered what her life might have been like without the illnesses, the Great Depression, the lost firstborn child, and
the demands of caring for the physical and emotional needs of her busy, important husband.

As I departed for college the following year, I was filled with my own longings for a rich and creative life, but it was not always easy for me, at eighteen, to figure out which of my dreams were my own and which were the ones she was dreaming through me. There was no doubt in my mind, however, that I would refuse to live my life in the shadow of any man.