Waiting for the Call

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Published by University of Michigan Press

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Waiting for the Call: From Preacher’s Daughter to Lesbian Mom.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/65905.
When I was about three years old, Daddy bought Mother a second-hand car, an old black 1941 Chevy sedan with a standard transmission. Mother was a tentative and somewhat nervous driver, although I didn’t know that then. She had the general idea of how to put in the clutch and shift gears, but she never quite mastered the stick shift. With characteristic good humor and love of alliteration, she christened her car Leapin’ Lena. In this way, she made the jerks and shudders with which each ride began seem to inhere in the vehicle. Each time she started the engine and let the clutch out too fast, she would sing out, “Off we go with a buck and a jump!” Jeannie and I would grab the back of the front seat and hold on for dear life as Leapin’ Lena, Mother’s fractious black mare, bucked her way down the road.

The truth is, Mother was scared, not just of stick shifts and driving but of so much else besides. “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (II Timothy 1:7), she quoted again and again. I figured out only after I got older that she was trying to encourage herself not just us kids. Almost every favorite scripture passage noted on the flyleaf of her Bible dealt with overcoming fear.
or coping with infirmity. Beautiful and brilliant, she never developed an accurate picture of her own strength and power.

In the public life into which Daddy’s career catapulted her, Mother graciously played her part. But, despite the carefully composed public persona, she remained, to a large extent, the scared, shy, country girl of her youth. She never ceased to remark in awed wonder on the distance she had traveled from a childhood of kerosene lamps, wood-burning stoves, outhouses, and horse and buggy transportation to the 747 jets that carried her and my father on travels around the globe. She often felt, I think now, a bit like a befuddled time traveler who finds herself dropped unexpectedly into a future landscape she can scarcely fathom.

Mother maintained a great sense of nostalgia for the world of her childhood. A collection of stories she wrote about those days is entitled “Dear Days beyond Recall.” She filled thirty pages with lively accounts of the toys and games of her childhood, of dogs they had owned, of Christmas celebrations. But when she reached the Great Depression years she stopped writing. Those years of want and hardship were not the dear days she wanted to relate. Despite her title, the happier days she did chronicle were not yet beyond her recall, but she must have felt on some level like the lone survivor of a vanished world. I’m inventing explanations, of course. Trying to account for the fearfulfulness in the life of this woman, who seemed to me such a bulwark.

As a young adult, I realized that my mother was afraid of many of the experiences and ideas her grown daughters brought into her world. I began to suspect that she could not teach me much of what I needed to know as a woman living in the seventies and eighties. Women of my generation were searching feverishly for strong role models, and I grew frustrated that my own mother, who had seemed, as parents do, omnipotent to my childhood self, couldn’t be the powerful trailblazer I needed her to be.

In the fall of 1993, just a couple of months before Carol and I moved back to Chicago, Mother was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma. Not long after she told us she was sick, Mother and Daddy came up to spend Thanksgiving with our family. They were both extraordinarily calm and philosophical about what lay ahead. Or perhaps it was not so extraordinary but rather a manifestation of the depth and reality of the faith they had spent their lives proclaiming. To me, anyway, it was mar-
velous and comforting to see the peace and confidence with which they met the approach of the unknown. Mother was scheduled to begin chemotherapy a few days after our visit. One morning while she and I sat on the couch visiting over coffee, I asked Daddy to take our picture. I knew exactly what I was after. We were both looking alive and healthy and happy. I wanted to hold on to that. I wanted to freeze the frame. I wanted the last possible picture of the two of us laughing and talking together with full heads of our own hair.

Losing her hair was about the only part of the experience lying before her that Mother worried about out loud. Not long after our visit, she told me that she was getting ready to buy a wig. “I’ve always hated my hair. I always wished I had a beautiful head of blonde hair like Marilyn Grissom. Now I’m sorry I ever talked bad about it,” she told me.

Mother thought her hair was too straight. Her older sister had had soft brown curls but not she. “Straight as a stick,” she would say with disgust, “and look at all these cowlicks!” At the nape of her neck, her hair grew into a long, sharp point. On each side of the point, the hair grew up and in. None of this was right. Hair was supposed to grow down, curl softly, and stay off your neck. If she hated her hair, she hated mine, too, for I had inherited her hair right down to the exact position of all three cowlicks.

“Well, Mother,” I replied, “this is your chance. Just march yourself into that wig store and tell them you’ll take one of those big, fluffy, platinum numbers. It’s now or never.” Still, when it came time to make a wig purchase, she bought a sensible silver-gray number with a touch of salt and pepper to it that looked so much like her own hair you almost couldn’t tell she was wearing a wig except, perhaps, for the bangs.

In January, in the midst of her chemotherapy, Mother experienced a small strokelike episode known as a transient ischemic attack, or TIA. In the hospital, her stroke symptoms diminished, but her blood pressure remained dangerously high. Her white cell count had been brought so low by the chemo that she was at serious risk of infection, and so the hospital placed her in reverse isolation. Hence everyone who entered her room was required to wear a mask. My father was beside himself with worry. They needed me. I booked a flight.

It had only been two weeks since we moved back to Chicago from
Madison, and the girls had just started attending their new preschool for two and a half hours a day. They rode the school bus to and from school. Riding the school bus had been one of the chief ambitions of their short lives, so they were thrilled to achieve this important goal at such an early age. But it was all rather a lot to get used to.

While Gracie’s focus was on helping our cat Louise adjust to the move, Lucy was not happy with my decision to go to Kentucky. “You told me that when we got back to Chicago we would all be together,” she complained. I had said that. I couldn’t think of any way to explain this that would make sense to a four year old. But I tried.

“Lucy, baby, I’m not going to travel back and forth all the time like when we lived in Madison. But Mother and Daddy need me right now. I have to go help them for a few days. Mama-Carol will be right here, and I’ll be back soon. If you were an adult and I were sick, wouldn’t you want to come and visit me?” Even as I said that, I could hear how ridiculous it must sound to her with all those ifs and a hypothetical faraway time in which I would need her to mother me, a time she could not imagine.

“I couldn’t leave Gracie,” she said. “And our animals.” Their current plan was to live together on a farm with dolphins and dogs and cats and blue horses. “Don’t you have a sister?” she asked. She knew perfectly well that I did.

“Yes, but she doesn’t plan to go right now. I’m the one who feels like I need to be there to help.”

“Well, your sister’s in Kentucky.”

“I know, honey. I’m sorry this isn’t good for you. I’ll hurry back as quick as I can.”

I arrived on the second day of Mother’s hospitalization and went straight to Baptist East Hospital. She was still wearing the gown they had put her in on Monday, and no one had washed her or combed her hair or brushed her teeth. I got her cleaned up and gave Daddy a list of things to bring from home. Jeannie’s husband, Doug, was in town for a meeting. Back at my parents’ house that night he took down the outdoor Christmas decorations and set up Mother and Daddy’s new answering machine while I did some laundry and cleaned the house.

Mother was tired and weak but surprisingly calm and cheerful. She
had accepted her hospitalization with admirable grace, but she objected to the masks we wore when we entered her room.

“You don’t need to wear that old thing,” she protested when I entered her hospital room for the first time. “Your little old germs couldn’t hurt me.” It was characteristic of my mother’s encompassing love that she extended her conviction of my basic goodness right down to my germs.

I stayed four days. I persuaded Daddy to line up someone to clean the house. They had been trying to do it themselves, and it had been getting more and more difficult for them. Now it would be impossible.

In the hospital, I read to Mother from the Bible and her well-thumbed copy of 101 Famous Poems. I bathed her weak, tired body, carefully covering with the sheet any part I was not washing. I polished her fingernails, washed and set her rapidly thinning hair, fixed her lipstick the way she liked it, and just held her hand. Her hand had the prominent veins that I have inherited. I ran my hands along those veins, like I used to do years ago when we sat together in church. I gently pinched a bit of the loose skin between my fingers and watched it stay there, the elasticity gone. My own skin still pops back into place, but more slowly now. We held our hands together, finger to finger. They were exactly the same size. Our fingernails had the same shape. We had the same little hills on the pads of our fingers. We entwined our fingers; we rubbed and stroked one another’s hands. Hard as it was to see her so sick, there was an extraordinary richness in those precious hours. My mother was just plain happy to be with me. I was just plain happy to be with her.

I was surprised. When she told me in November that she had lymphoma, I thought I knew for sure this was bad news. I thought her lymphoma would be something we would just have to get through. But sitting on her bed in the hospital, I began to realize that her lymphoma was not just something to get through. It was something to be in. There was an astounding sweetness to living together in the knowledge that our time for loving each other in this life was short. In a funny way that I never would have expected, this cancer brought us the chance to be together in the full light of our mortality but without having to experience just yet the final separation.

As we sat together, I didn’t feel there was anything I needed to hear
her say that she hadn’t already said. Nor did I feel there was anything I needed to tell her that hadn’t been told. Instead, I felt a kind of deep peace and a powerful connection flowing between us. Holding hands with her was like a prayer.

As her days in the hospital wore on, her situation deteriorated. On my third day there, she developed pneumonia, an especially dangerous disease for someone with few white blood cells, and then, as I sat on her hospital bed on January 13, she started to experience chest pains. My father had driven down to Somerset that day to keep a speaking commitment. When Mother complained of chest pains, I told her I was going for the nurse. “Don’t go get the nurse,” she objected. “She’ll just want to do a bunch of tests.”

“I certainly hope so,” I said.

I told her she’d have to try and stop me and headed to the nurse’s station. The nurse came on the run. She placed nitroglycerin under Mother’s tongue, and the chest pains eased. Heart disease. Cancer, diabetes, stroke, hardening of the arteries, pneumonia, and now heart disease.

That night Daddy returned and the family doctor came by. Daddy mentioned that the shaking in her hand might be, according to the neurologist, the beginnings of Parkinson’s. “I reckon if anybody’s going to get Parkinson’s it’s going to be me,” Mother said with a wry smile.

Right now we had much bigger worries than Parkinson’s disease. The doctor looked grim. “She’s a fighter,” he told us, “but she’s got a lot against her. It’s impossible to tell what will happen.” After he left, my mother, too weak to lift her head from her pillow, began to sing an old country hymn from her childhood: “Some glad morning when this life is o’er, I’ll fly away.”

“Mother,” I scolded, “don’t sing that.” She stopped.

“You don’t want me to sing that?” she asked, with a quizzical lift of her eyebrows.

“It’s a little too realistic under the circumstances, don’t you think?” She smiled and waited. After a few minutes, she tried again, “So you don’t want me to sing ‘I’ll Fly Away’?”

“No!” I insisted.
Some Glad Morning

A few more minutes slipped by. “So you don’t want me to sing that?” she asked once more, an amused smile playing around her mouth.

“My dear,” I asked, “do you want to sing it?”

“It ends happy.”

I thought I should humor her. I was too inexperienced to recognize that she was bearing gifts.

“OK, then, if you really want to sing it, you go on and sing it.” And so she did. Lying flat on her bed, she sang it all the way through.

Some glad morning when this life is o’er
I’ll fly away.
To a home on God’s celestial shore,
I’ll fly away.

I’ll fly away, O glory,
I’ll fly away.
When I die, hallelujah, by and by,
I’ll fly away.

When the shadows of this life have gone,
I’ll fly away.
Like a bird from prison bars has flown,
I’ll fly away.

Just a few more weary days and then,
I’ll fly away.
To a land where joys shall never end,
I’ll fly away.

I’ll fly away, O glory,
I’ll fly away.
When I die, hallelujah, by and by,
I’ll fly away.

That night at home Daddy and I were scared. We laughed about her song, about her amazing spirit. We touched on his fears of a life without her. He told me he knew it would be difficult, but he knew that somehow he would find the strength to go on. “You know,” he said, his eyes wrinkling in a soft smile, “Marjorie has been pointing out first one and then
another woman at the church that she thinks would make me a good wife.” I wasn’t all that surprised. It sounded just like her to want to make things as easy on him as possible. She couldn’t really see him managing alone. “Finally,” he said with a laugh, “I just told her, ‘Marjorie, I did a pretty good job picking out my first wife, and if it comes to that I can pick out my second one, too.’” Still, it was nice to know she was so set on taking care of us, whichever side of the grave she might be on.

When Mother sang “I’ll Fly Away,” it wasn’t the first time she had comforted me about her death. A year or two earlier I had come home for a visit. Mother told me that she and Daddy wanted to drive over to Cave Hill Cemetery to show me the plots they had recently purchased. In truth, I had not been sitting at the breakfast table that morning hoping for a trip to the cemetery. But I figured cemetery plots were probably an inevitable gathering site among my parents’ age group. I was a grown-up. I could feign a gracious interest.

It was a glorious spring morning. As we stood on the hillside where Mother’s and Daddy’s plots were located, the flowering trees and bushes blazed in the bright light of the sun. Mother was radiant, too, as she talked happily about how much she loved this beautiful cemetery and described the features of this particular spot. She mentioned some friends with nearby plots, and we joked about how they could run back and forth and visit one another. Then she looked at me. “Jackie, I wanted to bring you here on this sunny spring day, when the birds are singing and the flowers are blooming and we’re all together, to tell you how happy it makes me to think about being buried in this beautiful spot. Someday, when you come back here to bury us, I hope you will remember this day.”

By the time I flew back to Chicago after four days at Mother’s bedside, I was starting to rethink my notions of what constituted fear and courage and my ideas about who was caring for whom. I hated to leave her. And yet I was glad to point my face toward home.

Carol and the girls picked me up at the airport. All of them were tickled to see me, but Lucy grinned so hard she looked as if she might pop. She talked rapidly all the way home from the airport, trying to tell me everything that had happened while I was gone.

A friend came by that day for lunch. Lucy told her, “First we were in
Madison and Mama-Jackie was always going to Chicago, and then we moved to Chicago and Mama-Jackie went to Kentucky.” Over the course of the weekend, she repeated that same account to two more visitors. It was impossible to ignore the theme of betrayal and abandonment not far below the surface in this tale.

Each night Lucy prayed for Grandmama. “Will Grandmama die?” she asked God. “What will happen to Granddaddy without her?” I wasn’t sure when or whether God would get back to her, so I did my best to answer these questions. I told her that Grandmama would surely die, just as every living creature eventually dies, and that we didn’t know when it would be but hoped it would not be for a long time. Each morning Lucy got up asking whether this would be the day Grandmama would come home from the hospital.

Because the following Monday was Martin Luther King Day, there was no school. When I tucked the girls into bed that night, Gracie fell asleep the moment her head touched the pillow. “Lucy,” I said, as I settled her in, “it was great to spend the day together. Didn’t we have a good day?” I thought I was asking a rhetorical question.

“Not that good,” Lucy replied.

“What was wrong with it?”

“No special time with you,” Lucy fired back immediately.

“You’re right. We haven’t had that since I got home. Tomorrow when you get home from school you can come with me to Timothy’s for my haircut, and then we’ll go out for a treat.” She liked the sound of this and fell right to sleep.

But the next day, January 18, the temperature plummeted to twenty-five degrees below zero and all the Chicago public schools canceled classes. I canceled my haircut as well, and Lucy and I had to make do with an hour of reading on the sunporch.

School remained closed yet another day, but when it warmed up to only single digits below zero, Lucy and I headed to a neighborhood café for a treat. The waitress brought Lucy a place mat for coloring and a small box of crayons. Lucy reciprocated by telling the waitress all of our business. “My sister Gracie wanted to come with us and she was crying, but she couldn’t come because I needed some special time with Mama-
Jackie.” She beamed as she explained all this. She wiggled with delight when we got our matching cookies and our matching glasses of water. We’re the same. We’re connected. We’re together.

My mother came home from the hospital one week after I returned to Chicago. She was still weak but making progress.

It was during this month of January, the month of the new school, the month of my mother’s hospitalization, the month of our adjustment to our Chicago return, that Gracie invented a new game. Lucy and Gracie each, in turn, would crouch in the back of the pantry, meowing. The sister not in the pantry would go to the pet store to find a new kitten. She would invite the kitten into the family. We listened to the conversation. The kitten’s mother was dead. The kitten needed to be adopted.

After a few rounds of this, they enlisted our help. We were the mothers. We must come to the pet store to find a kitten. Sometimes there were two waiting kittens. Sometimes, one girl was our kitten already and would accompany us to the pet store to look for a sister. Each time we encountered a girl huddled in the pantry, we would exclaim over the beautiful, special kitten who was oh so right for us. We would invite her into our family. She would nod her little kitten head and jump into our arms.

The game evolved again. Now the kittens waited in the closet at the back of the pantry. With the pantry and closet doors closed, it was quite dark. I wondered at their willingness to crouch there on the floor of the closet in the dark, waiting to be reborn into their adoptive family.

Gracie played this game with particular urgency. She wanted to play it all day long. She hid in the closet again and again, meowing. Again and again, we walked away from the dishes, the cooking, the newspaper, the work due the next day, to come to the pet store and discover the perfect kitten waiting to join our family. The kitten was curled in a ball at the back of the closet, her face buried. “Oh, look,” one of us would say. “Look at the little sleeping kitten.”

We would lift kitten Gracie into our arms, and she would begin to purr. “Why, she’s a beautiful little kitten! She’s just the kind of kitten we’ve always wanted. Let’s adopt her. Kitty, sweet little kitty, will you come home with us and let us take care of you? We’ve always wanted a kitten just like you.”
Gracie would purr even louder and nuzzle her face against us in a happy kitten nod. We would stroke her black hair and scratch her softly under her chin.

A few days after she came home from the hospital, Mother fell and cut her leg badly. Because of the risk of infection, she was readmitted to Baptist East.

Each day I talked to my parents. Mother was less patient with the hospital stay this time. Stubbornly independent, she walked to the sink one night and, as all the long-legged Taylors do when we want clean feet, lifted her foot up and stuck it in the basin. Except now she was seventy-two years old, recovering from a TIA and weakened by chemo, and the sink was a high hospital sink. So she fell backward, banging her head and skinning a place on her hip. I began to talk to Carol about whether I should go down again when Mother got out of the hospital.

One night I walked into the kitchen as Gracie nestled in Carol’s arms, talking about how she came into our family.

“Where was I?” Gracie wanted to know.

“You were in the orphanage waiting with the other babies for your family,” Carol told her.

“And what were they doing with us there?”

“They were feeding you and changing your diapers and cuddling you and taking care of you.”

But Gracie persisted. “But what were we doing?”

I thought I knew what she wanted to hear. “You were mad sometimes and bored sometimes and lonesome sometimes because they were so busy they didn’t have time to pick up any of the babies as much as you would have liked. You were waiting and waiting for your moms and wondering when your family life was going to begin.”

Gracie accepted my contribution with a satisfied look. “And what did I do when you came?” she asked Carol.

“I took you in my arms, and we gave each other a big hug, and you said, ‘Chchchchc,’” replied Carol, imitating one of Gracie’s favorite mouth noises. “And I said, ‘you don’t say, Gracie, tell me more.’ And you said ‘Cchhhh.’”

“And then you took me to the doctor?”

“Yes, and he liked you. Doctor Arribas-Plata. He said you were a
showcase baby because you became so alert and lively after we had a few
days together. And he gave me some medicine so I could get you all
well.”

Half an hour later Gracie and I lay sprawled on the big bed, coloring.
Gracie had placed our gray and white cat, Louise, on the bed beside us.

“Louise,” she told her, accompanying her story with a series of loving
pats, “you were waiting and waiting and waiting at the pet store for some-
one to come and buy you and you were waiting and waiting for a long
time, and then Jackie came and taked you home.”

“Ahhh,” I said softly, “yes, of course.”

Mother was out of the hospital after a ten-day stay. My father realized
that she was not safe at home alone, and yet he didn’t have anyone to take
care of her when he left the house. Over the phone, his voice cracked with
fear and worry and exhaustion. I realized he needed help making deci-
sions about how best to care for her. I made a reservation for the next
week.

Lucy and I went downstairs to borrow half a teaspoon of thyme from
our neighbor, Beth. We sat for a few moments and talked about my
mother. “I don’t think she can be left alone anymore,” I said. “They’re
going to have to have some help.”

“Not you,” protested Lucy.

“I can’t be their help all the time,” I responded, “but I am going to
have to go down again soon for a few days to help them make some
plans.”

“You promised you weren’t going to do that anymore,” Lucy accused
me, indignation ringing in her voice.

“No,” I said. “I never promised that. I have to go for a few days, but
I’ll be right back. I have to come back to you. We belong together.” I gave
her a tight squeeze.

“You do belong together. You make a great pair,” Beth assented, try-
ing to ease the moment.

After the girls were in bed, Carol and I talked about Lucy’s distress.
Carol reminded me that when we moved back to Chicago I promised
Lucy that I would not go anywhere for a long, long time. The purpose of
the move, I assured her, was to bring our family together in one place so
that we would have no more of the frequent separations that character-
ized our commuter arrangement. The distinction between my weekly commutes and what had suddenly become monthly visits to my parents was a subtle distinction even to our adult minds.

The next morning, right after my first cup of tea, I asked Lucy to come and sit on my bed so we could talk. “I thought about what you said,” I told her. “I did tell you that once we moved to Chicago I would not go anywhere again for a long, long time and that we would be together without separations.”

“I was right; you were wrong. I knew I was right,” Lucy crowed.

“Yes, honey, you were right. Listen, Lucy, I am not going to go away each week for my job. That will never happen again. But when we talked about how I would not go anywhere for a long time I didn’t know my mother would get sick. This is an emergency, and I have to go and help them for a few days, but I will hurry home to you.”

We were still playing Adopt a Kitty several times a day. Gracie had created yet another variation. Costumed in a hot pink bandanna tied babushka style—except backward, with the point coming over her forehead—and with a long swath of hot pink lace forming a shawl around her shoulders, Gracie would knock and then meow at the kitchen door. Carol or I would open the door to find Gracie crouched in the dining room, mewing softly.

“Why, it’s a kitty!” we would exclaim, opening the door wider. “Come in and let us take care of you. Where have you been?”

“I’ve been lost in the woods. My mama died.”

“Oh, poor kitty, won’t you be in our family? Come in to our nice warm house and let us love you forever. Can we take your scarf and your shawl?”

The well-brought-up kitty would hand us her wraps and jump into our arms for a few good cuddles. Sometimes she asked to be introduced to her sister kitty, Lucy, or to our other kitty, Louise. Sometimes she explained sadly that there were bears in the woods and she’d been out there for a long, long time. We would cuddle her more tightly when we heard about the bears, and stroke her back, and she would burrow her face into her new mama’s neck.

Before catching my plane to Louisville on the morning of February 17, I walked with Lucy to the school bus corner. We always held hands on
the way to the bus. “Lucy,” I said, “just remember while I’m gone that I love you forever!”

“Me too,” she replied in a quiet little voice.

“We love each other!” I proclaimed, swinging her arm.

“We love each other, we love each other!” she sang, skipping beside me. “We’re walking to the bus, and we love each other!” She sang this through two or three times as we skipped down the street to the bus stop. I, at least, felt comforted. Her happy song gave me hope.

In Louisville, my feeble, worn-out, and addled mother struggled to navigate more safely with the help of a four-footed cane. She seemed muddled in her thinking and uncharacteristically querulous. I suspected from her demeanor that she might be entering a manic episode. The easy connection we shared on her hospital bed a few weeks earlier seemed far away. She knit her brow together in a worried frown and fussed about her hair, which in the past three weeks had fallen out by the fistfuls. I cast about for a way to connect with her.

I went to the hall closet, where she kept all her old hats, and began pulling them out and piling them, hatbox after hatbox, on the brightly colored cross-stitched quilt that covered the guest bed. She followed me into the bedroom, tapping clumsily with what she referred to as “that pleckit cane.” *Pleckit* is the shortened form of *plague-taked* (a Baptist way to swear).

“What are you doing with all my old hats?” she asked.

“Let’s try them on,” I said. “Let’s see which ones still look good. You might want to wear some of these again now that you don’t have much hair.”

Mother always loved hats. She had boxes and boxes of beautiful hats, spring hats, fall hats, winter hats, straw hats, felt hats, and peacock feather hats, hats she had shopped for in Louisville’s and Somerset’s finest dress shops throughout the forties and fifties and into the sixties. Back when accessories meant a hat, white gloves, and matching purse and pumps, Mother knew how to pull an outfit together.

We started opening boxes. We pulled out each hat, one by one, all lovingly wrapped in tissue paper. There were big straw boaters in black and red and navy. An elegant black straw with a stovepipe shape. Another wide-brimmed straw, this one bought in Egypt to shade her face when
she rode on a camel to the pyramids. A little jewel-colored whimsy in iridescent shades of turquoise, green, purple, blue, and violet. Two Borsalinos bought on separate trips to Rome—a wine-colored beret with her initials in its band and a black one with a brim. She had been so proud of each of these, pronouncing their name, Borsalino, with relish and showing me how they folded up in their neat little boxes and then popped back out again to assume their saucy shapes. They were great hats. You could squish them, squash them, sit on them, and still they bounced back. And of course there was the brown, gold, and turquoise peacock-feather pillbox with the brown velvet piping that she bought in Louisville in 1960, the day she and Daddy found out that an anonymous donor had given them a forty-two-day trip to Europe and the Middle East.

We tried on every hat. We divided them into piles: the hopelessly out-of-date, the could come back any minute, the goes with anything, and the perfect for covering a bald head. We were like two girls playing dress up.

Later, after Mother had gone down for her lengthy afternoon nap, Daddy cried on my shoulder. “She’s not making sense so much of the time.” This worried him terribly. He felt her beginning to slip away, and he thought if he could just get her to straighten out her facts he could keep her with him longer. He was correcting each misstatement so emphatically that he was starting to make her jumpy.

“I know she’s not,” I said, “but you have to quit worrying about whether she’s making sense or not. Here’s what we have to worry about now. Is she safe? Is she having a good time? If she’s safe and having a good time, then you’ve done all you can do.” He grabbed that thought and held on.

“We just have to keep her safe,” he repeated, “and make sure she’s having a good time.”

But the truth was that when he left her alone she was not safe. She fell easily. She could not keep track of the many medications she took throughout the day. She was confused and disoriented. We talked about a neighbor, a friend of Mother’s, who could be hired to stay with her when Daddy went out. Mother didn’t think much of the idea when we presented it to her. She liked her privacy. But Daddy and I insisted, and, trusting us, she acquiesced.

Flying home, I ached with love and sorrow. She was still with us, but
she was already slipping away. Caring for my parents brought me such a
bittersweet mix of joy and grief. Mother was still here to give to, and yet
she was drifting out of my grasp just as I was finally able to fully compre-
hend how truly precious she was.

When I washed her off or helped her dress, I couldn’t escape the con-
nections with the daily care I gave my own children—children who
would one day grow too big to need my daily ministrations. My mother
would need me more and more until she ceased to need anyone. I
thought of all the care she had given me, care I was now returning to her
and passing on to my own daughters. I didn’t know how I would find the
energy to keep giving in both directions with my heart aching like this.
Sometimes I couldn’t breathe very well. If I hadn’t had daughters of my
own, I don’t think I could have kept breathing at all.

But just as I felt I might be pulled in two Mother began to get better.
She was not yet ready, after all, to fly away. She made it through the final
course of chemo with her cancer in remission. She began to recover some
of her strength. Her hair grew back, short and curly. The curls were com-
mon in the first growth after chemo. There was even a name for this: the
chemo curl. “What a way to get those curls I always wanted,” she joked.
She was happy to discard the turbans she had worn for weeks and to get
her own hair back on her head. She welcomed it, curly or straight,
cowlicks and all, and in any color.

“What a way to get those curls I always wanted,” she joked. “The worst part was los-
ing my hair.”

I snorted. “Oh, I thought the worst part was when you almost died.”

“We and Eldred probably remember it better than I do. I didn’t think
it was so awful.” Stick shifts and highways terrified her, but when my
fearful, anxious mother encountered her own death she was as solid and
serene as a burr oak.