In the months that followed, I felt as if my life were shattered. The day after the funeral, Carol and the girls drove back to Chicago. I stayed on to help my father. We couldn’t bear to go to church that Sunday morning. Instead, we drove out to Burnheim Forest, a woods Mother had loved, and puffed up and down a steep trail. The trees were bare and indistinguishable to me. Mother would have been able to identify each one by the shape of their leafless skeletons, the texture of their bark. The sun shone improbably in a brazen autumn sky. We were worn out by the time we got back home, not so much from our short hike as from the grueling, heart-wrenching week.

Yet, with typical Taylor efficiency, we set ourselves to cleaning out her closets and drawers almost immediately. Daddy believed we needed to get her things out of the house. He didn’t want to live in a museum. As we sorted through her clothes, we found neatly folded squares of Kleenex in every pocket and purse. The embroidered handkerchiefs of her youth had passed out of style, but she continued her lifelong practice of carrying the modern version of the clean folded handkerchief her mother had taught her never to be without. Little sachets of lavender perfumed her bureau drawers. Rows of beautiful pumps, some twenty or even thirty
years old, still rested in their original shoe boxes. These were the clothes of a gracious lady from a bygone era.

We were ruthless. We paused from time to time to talk about memories attached to a particular garment, then moved ahead, creating careful piles to give to the church. Only the hats were spared. I claimed them all, the hopelessly out-of-date, the could be good with the right outfit, and the perfect to cover a bald head during chemo.

When I sat down in her maple rocking chair to rest, I fell asleep and dreamed that the house was leaking. I tried to call Mr. Bill, the fellow who keeps my Chicago house in good condition but, although I dialed and dialed, I could not get the telephone to work. Water was pouring down from the ceiling. As I struggled awake, the soundtrack of my dream began to play “This Old House.”

This old house is getting leaky,
This old house is getting old,
This old house lets in the rain,
And this old house let in the cold,
Ain’t got time to fix the shutters,
Ain’t got time to fix the doors,
Ain’ta gonna need this house no more.

More fully awake, I considered my dream. It was too obvious to be interesting. My shelter was gone. The roof was leaking or, more accurately, gushing. I couldn’t get through to anyone. Not only that, but the body was a house in the process of decaying, a house that even I, who had thought myself so young, wouldn’t be needing all that long.

On Monday night, two days after the funeral, I flew home. It was Halloween, and I wanted to be with the girls. I wanted to drop candy into the maws of the extended bags thrust forward by the dazed and sugar-glutted trick-or-treaters. I wanted to be happy about my children’s Halloween excitement, but instead the parade of tiny ghouls and Disney characters across my porch, the whole carnivalesque atmosphere, jarred me. I don’t recall Lucy’s and Gracie’s costumes that night, but I remember feeling more of a liability than an asset. Carol had dressed up as the Grim Reaper. Her costume had been planned for a couple of weeks. She walked into the living room wearing a long black robe and chalk-white
face paint. In her hand, she carried a rubber scythe. I stared at her, transfixed. I remember thinking, this is so bizarre it would be funny if I weren’t so tired and sad.

For months I felt broken. I worried about Carol and my daughters, who had to put up with the cracked and empty shell of what had once been a vital, vibrant person. I created a small shrine to Mother in a corner of the sunporch. I set out pictures of her, her Bible, a box of Tabu talcum powder, the embroidered black silk purse and black kid gloves she had brought home from Paris, some stones and shells she had loved, a beautiful silk scarf. I added a copy of Roger Tory Peterson’s *Field Guide to Birds* and, later on, a bird’s nest the girls found. Sometimes I would place fresh flowers there. In a comfortable chair next to this shrine, I would sit and cry at night after I had tucked the girls in bed. Several times Lucy heard me snuffling and came out to give me a hug. “It will be OK,” she comforted. “Don’t worry.” One night Gracie found me in my soggy corner. She circled her arms around me and said, “I know just how you feel.” And she did. My little girls were already experienced in mother loss.

Just a year earlier, our cat Louise had died. We buried her in the backyard, and the girls made good-bye cards for her. This had been their first encounter with death. We had lasted only a few days without a cat before we went to the animal shelter and adopted two, a small, orange tabby with an improbably loud purr whom we named Brenda Starr, and Big Boy, a magnificent, giant-sized, black and white cat with long, soft fur. Lucy liked to point out to anyone who would listen that he was the only male in the family. Now, as I sat in my chair and missed my mother, Big Boy would leap into my lap and curl his enormous self against me. Brenda Starr would stand nearby, purring like a small helicopter.

Dream: Daddy is divorcing Mother after fifty-three years of marriage. I beg him to reconsider, but he is adamant. Mother pleads with me to talk some sense into him, but I am powerless to change his mind.

Dream: Mother has wandered off from the house in a state of mental confusion and gotten lost. We can’t find her anywhere. We believe her dead. But she isn’t. She is living in a nursing home. She wants us to come and get her right away. I am thrilled but also horrified. What will she think when she learns that we have given away all her beautiful clothes? I
try to make arrangements to bring her home, but none of my plans works. Sometimes I lose her again; sometimes I can’t arrange the transportation. Finally, I bring her home, but when we pull into the driveway Daddy is standing there with his new wife. He has remarried. Mother is furious, but what can we do? We had thought she was dead. The new wife makes awkwardly friendly overtures, but Mother and Daddy look stricken. I awaken to find that even this scenario is not as awful as the reality. She is gone. We will not find her. She is not on her way back to us.

Dream: I am teaching a night class. During the break, I enter the restroom. I collapse onto the floor and lay my head up against the bathroom stall, where I begin to weep in great, loud, wracking sobs. The door of one of the stalls opens, and a confident and crisply groomed, professional-looking woman emerges. Without a glance at me, she marches to the sink, washes and dries her hands, and, stepping over my sobbing body, exits the restroom, oblivious to my desolation. I awaken. Yes, I think, I am both of those women: the one who sits sobbing on the floor of the public bathroom and the one who steps briskly over that crumpled wreck to go on about her work.

I marveled at how I had believed until Mother’s death that I was an I, that I was doing things myself. Now, I realized, I had always been a we. I had never done anything without the strong sense that she was watching my back, that win, lose, or draw I was splendid, I was hers, and if it didn’t work out as I hoped I could cuddle into one of her big, soft hugs and find comfort.

Now I was the oldest mother in my family. Daddy and Jeannie and her husband came to Chicago for Thanksgiving, and we made dinner for them. I fixed the dinner as Mother would have fixed it, preparing the sage and cornbread stuffing according to her recipe. Somehow, bit by bit, I would have to learn to be a mother without a mother.

Daddy and Jeannie were much pluckier than I. In January, Daddy gave his first dinner party, entertaining three couples. While I was still wishing for someone to bring me covered dishes, he served up a roast, vegetables, and a Jell-O fruit salad, capping the sumptuous meal with a pecan pie he had baked from scratch. As Mother’s health had failed, his load of cooking and housework had grown until, by the time of her death, he was doing nearly everything. Doing for himself was not an adjustment.
But he was unbearably lonely. He called often, delighting in my family more than he ever had. But we could not replace the daily companionship he had lost and for which he yearned.

By February, not quite four months after Mother’s death, he began to talk of dating. He pulled out the church directory and pointed to photographs of a couple of attractive women.

“What do you think of her?” he asked.

“She looks nice, I guess,” Jeannie replied. “Are you looking in the catalogue for your next wife?” He had, after all, found the first while leafing through his high school yearbook.

“I’m so lonely,” he said simply. “I loved your mother with all my heart. I never looked at another woman while she lived. I was the best husband I knew how to be. But she’s not here anymore, and I need a companion. I don’t need someone to cook and clean for me. I can do that. But I need someone to talk to, someone at my side.”

Who could argue with this? By March, he was flirting at Wednesday night Prayer Meeting with a pretty widow. She had short blond hair and perfectly manicured fingernails. She also had a twinkle in her eye and a quick rejoinder for every teasing remark he proffered. She never missed church, even singing in the choir. Tenor. A whirlwind courtship ensued. As near as I could tell from his accounts, they went from flirting to dating in about one week and from dating to engagement in the second.

He was like a teenager. He called to tell me how he had kidded her and to ask if it sounded to me like she could be interested. (He was sure she was.) How long, he wondered, before he could ask her out? A day or two later he called to say that they had a date scheduled for Friday night. After he got off the phone, I wondered how long it would take him to get serious and whether he would tell her about me, his wicked lesbian daughter who had gone off to live among the Yankees.

I didn’t wonder long. The next morning he called to tell me what a grand time they had. He had come out to her about his lesbian daughter on the very first date. He needed to know where she stood before he got involved. I had to love him for that.

He was extraordinarily proud of her response. So proud, in fact, that he told me three times how she had taken this news of a lesbian daughter in stride. She hadn’t batted an eye. “I don’t have a problem with that,”
she told him. “One of my sons had a good friend who turned out to be gay, and one of my friends has a gay son. We could learn a lot from some of those people.” Daddy was delighted. “I told her,” he recounted and recounted and recounted, “Jackie knows that I don’t condone it, and I don’t understand it. But she’s my daughter, and I love her.” Those were the very words he kept repeating to me: “I don’t condone it, and I don’t understand it. But she’s my daughter, and I love her.” The first time he told me this story I told him that was nice. And in truth I was relieved that he had chosen someone who, by Southern Baptist lights, was open-minded. The second time I must have mumbled something mildly supportive, although I can only remember my temper rising. By the third time he told me, it was a week after they had begun dating, and he was in Chicago for a short visit. The relationship was growing intense. His excitement about her and pain at the brief separation were palpable. Indeed, they had already begun to talk marriage. As we sat together on my sunporch, he launched once again into praise for her gracious response.

He had come so far. Perhaps it was churlish of me to want more. Perhaps I was harder on him than I needed to be, than was fair. I was still feeling so bereft, and here he was falling in love. Here I sat, twelve years into a lifetime relationship with a beloved I could not marry, while he heard wedding bells after a week of dating. I was a roiling mass of fair and unfair resentments. I was growing to hate this story. Its language of judgment and righteousness set my teeth on edge.

“Every time you tell me this story I’m getting more and more irritated with you,” I said. “We need to talk.” “OK,” he said, unable to imagine what could be wrong.

“It’s about this statement you keep making,” I said. “You don’t condone it, and you don’t understand it. Since you’re not gay and you’re not God, I’m having a hard time figuring out who put you in the judgment seat. I have two choices here. Either God made me gay or God didn’t make me. Which would you prefer I choose? I’ve chosen a God who made me gay over a world with no God.” As I spoke, I worried that I was simplifying my own and others’ reality by suggesting that all gay people are born that way. In truth, who knows what mix of nature and nurture produces sexual orientation? But of this much I am sure: sexuality is a gift

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from God. The debate among people of faith should be about what constitutes respectful and life-affirming use of that great gift. Right now, however, I was barreling forward, pressing my argument by pointing out that just as surely as he disagreed with some of my choices I disagreed with some of his (getting engaged after a week of dating, for example, though I left this unuttered). Surely we could respect the core of integrity that ran through both our lives. He was listening quietly, letting me talk myself out, not even trying to interrupt.

“Now, second,” I said, numbering my major points as he always did in his sermons, “I want to respond to your saying you don’t understand this. When you told me in 1988 that you didn’t understand, I let it pass. We were only six years past my coming out. At that point, a loving connection seemed like achievement enough. But we’re now eight years farther down the road. You have been in Carol’s and my home for twelve years. You have seen our love and commitment. You have seen the way we have stuck with each other through good times and hard times. You have seen the loving home we provide for our two children. What is it about this that you do not understand? The feelings that are calling you and Helen together are the same feelings that brought Carol and me together. Heart calls to heart. What about this is beyond your understanding?”

My father is a good man. He looked me in the eye. “I’m glad you talked to me about this, Jackie,” he said bravely. “I think maybe the language I used doesn’t accurately reflect where I am at this point in my journey.”

He never meant to raise a daughter quite like me. He must have imagined someone less bull-headed and more devout. But he has loved me enough to teach me to speak up for myself and to listen when I do. He has had the grace to love the daughter he got. I suppose you can’t ask for much more than that.

During that short visit, his mind was ever on Helen. I was happy to see him so excited and yet pained, too, to watch him fall in love so soon after Mother had died. He grew young in his exuberance. He confided that he and Helen were powerfully attracted to one another but that they had pledged to wait until marriage to be intimate.

“Don’t tell me,” I replied.
“It won’t be easy, but we know we can do it.”
“Don’t tell me,” I insisted.
“Your mother and I loved each other very much, but we pledged that we would wait until we were married, and even though we dated for a year we waited.”
“Don’t tell me.”
“It wasn’t easy. But we waited.”
“Don’t tell me!” I almost shouted, but I was laughing. He could not help himself.

Carol drove him to the airport. He was giddy with delight at heading home to his new girlfriend. “Have fun, Eldred,” she said as she let him out of the car.

“But not too much fun,” he replied.
She grinned at him. “Have all the fun you want for all I care.”
Within three months, he had married Helen.

“Well,” my sister said to me on the phone, “you know that old question about if a tree falls in the forest, and there’s no one there to hear it, has there been a sound? With Daddy, it’s like this. If he has an experience, but there’s no one there to tell it to, has he had an experience? Answer: no. He can’t survive without an attentive audience.”

She had a point. Anyway, they were visibly happy, and life was moving on with or without us. So we gave them our blessing. Helen had four grown sons and five grandchildren. The night before the wedding we all gathered for a meal at the home of one her sons. Daddy was exuberant. He eagerly explained that their courtship was not as brief as it seemed because they had spent so much time together. “Calculated in dog years, maybe,” I rejoined. He was enough of a sport to laugh.

And life did move on. Helen was not my mother, and she had the grace not to try to be, but she loved Eldred and brought him a happiness he had not had in a long time. The growing burden of care for my mother had fallen on him far more heavily than I could bear to imagine. He seemed suddenly younger, with a renewed spring in his step. Helen gave him a makeover, teaching him to let his slacks ride a couple of inches lower on his waist, getting him to sometimes forgo ties and white shirts in favor of snappy black turtlenecks and sport coats.

I limped through the circle of a year without my mother and hoped
the worst was over. Little by little joy seeped back into my world. Gradually, Mother started holding me up again. Or maybe she was doing so all along, but it took me that long to get to where I could notice it. However it was, I awakened, as if from a long sleep, in the summer of the second year after her death. I realized that, although I felt much better, I missed being adored. Carol loved me dearly, but if she had ever tried to dote on me like my mother did she would have driven me crazy. My children certainly weren’t going to fill that void. I missed being Mother’s moon and stars. And then, that second summer, I realized there was a small thing I could do about the hole in my life her death had created.

I could get a dog.

To our already full-to-bursting household, I added a nine-month-old Corgi named Bonnie. Big Boy and Brenda Starr hissed and arched their backs for a couple of days and then decided she was family. I fed, walked, and trained her. And she boisterously welcomed me home each day and followed me about with an adoring look that helped heal my broken heart.

With such simple steps, and more and more each day, I returned my care and attention to my life with my chosen family. I had never stopped being with them and doing for them, but the sense of being and doing as a hollow shell receded. I gradually came to inhabit my body again. I remembered to breathe. I closed the shrine and distributed the pictures and mementos of Mother around the house.

“Onward through the fog,” Mother often quoted. Now I said the same, walking in the cloudy present toward whatever was coming next.