

A Sliver of Light

A few trusting words can lead the way out of darkness

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I PULLED INTO THE GROCERY STORE parking lot and sat in the car, trying to muster my nerve. It took all my emotional strength just to open the door, cross the lot and enter the store.

In the produce aisle, I froze. Should I buy red, green or yellow apples? I couldn't decide. I stared at the apples, blinking back tears. Was I really going to cry right here in the middle of the grocery store? I had to leave. I grabbed the basics—milk and butter—hurried back to the car and fled for home.

There was no question now. The depression I'd fought off successfully for years—almost two decades!—was back. With a vengeance. I couldn't hide it anymore. Rick, my husband, already knew. My mother probably suspected. How long before everyone else figured it out? *Get a grip*, they'd think. *What kind of loser falls apart in the produce aisle?* That's what I thought.

I drove through the drab February woods to our log cabin. I felt drab inside too. Swallowed by an ever-expanding void. I wished it *would* swallow me. All I wanted was to disappear.

Where were these feelings coming from? All the stresses that had brought on my first bout of clinical depression were gone. Back then, I was a young mother returning to college to get the degree I knew my daddy, an engineer, had always wished I'd earned. I aced my English and psychology classes but struggled with math and finally quit, unable to balance school and parenting. Feelings of failure plunged me into months of despair. I eventually pulled out of it with the

EMERGENCE Depression made Julie feel as if she were disappearing.

help of medication and lots of prayer.

Maybe I wasn't praying hard enough this time. My kids were grown and gone. I'd discovered a new career as a writer of devotionals and magazine stories despite having no degree. I was working on a novel. Failures don't spend 14 hours a day perfecting a novel, right?

Yet a few months earlier, I'd noticed my appetite dwindling. I woke up at night, my mind racing. Sometimes I trembled so hard I'd wake Rick. Dark circles appeared under my eyes. My clothes got loose.

"Julie, what's wrong?" Rick asked. "You should see the doctor. Maybe you need to go back on medication. At least take a break from writing. You look worn out."

Take a break? I needed to work *harder*. What Rick didn't seem to understand was that the stories and devotionals I'd published so far weren't enough. Real writers wrote books. Mother was a writer—had been since I was a little girl. She published books. If I published a novel it wouldn't matter that I'd never finished college. People would respect me as a storyteller. I'd respect myself.

I GOT OUT OF THE CAR, HOISTED the grocery bag with the milk and the butter and went inside. Rick was at work at his auto-repair shop. I'd left a few lamps on when I went shopping but the house felt dark and cold.

I put away the groceries and paced

around the house, glancing upstairs at my little writing loft, which Rick had designed especially for me when he built this cabin.

I knew I should go up there and get to work but I just couldn't. I dreaded turning on the computer and staring at that screen. Truth be told, I'd already tried and failed three times to write a novel. My greatest passion, writing, had become my tormentor.

Just a few days earlier, I'd followed Rick's advice and gone to a doctor, who'd put me back on an antidepressant. Well, I still felt crippled by sadness and anxiety. Because my problem wasn't simply depression. My problem was I was a *failure*.

The phone rang. Mother.

"Let's go to the Dairy Queen," she said, sounding chipper. "I feel like a burger for lunch. I'll be there in thirty minutes."

She hung up before I could think of an excuse. I loved my mother, but she was the last person I wanted to see right now. I could tell from her voice she'd figured out about my depression and was coming to cheer me up. Nothing could cheer me up right now.

Half an hour later, Mother's cream-colored sedan eased up the driveway. She got out carrying an antique vase of pansies, a book and a candy bar. Half of me was seized with a childish impulse to race down the porch steps and hug her. The other half wanted to lock the front door.

She was impeccably dressed in a golden sweater, beige flats and dark



MATERNAL INSTINCT Julie's mother, Marion, helped Julie at a low point.

jeans. I couldn't help remembering all the times years ago when she had gotten dressed up and headed out to her writers' group, leaving me, the oldest, in charge of my little sister and brothers.

Back then, I'd vowed I wouldn't become a writer because of what it did to families. And I'd kept that promise for a long time, waiting until my kids were grown before going all-out on my writing career. Of course, I'd paid a price for that. Lacking experience, I had to make up for lost time.

"I changed my mind," I said to Mother. "I'd rather not leave the house."

"I know, Julie-babe," she said. "But this is a step of faith. You need to do this. Let's go."

At the Dairy Queen, she ordered for both of us. I left my burger untouched. She finished hers and went back to the counter. She returned bearing two banana splits.

"I'll bet that you've forgotten how

incredible these are," she said.

Actually, I *had* forgotten. Seeing that glorious mound of ice cream, whipped cream, fruit and nuts took me back to childhood. I unclenched a little. Maybe I could share my feelings with someone at last.

"Can I tell you something strange?" I asked.

"Of course," she said.

My voice dropped to a whisper. "Mother, I'm scared. I feel like I'm disappearing. I've stopped sleeping. What if I can't beat it this time?"

"You will," she said matter-of-factly.

"How do you know?"

She put down her red plastic spoon and leaned toward me. "Because right now you can't trust your thoughts. They're lying to you. But you can trust me. I won't lie to you. Now, take a bite of your banana split."

I took a small bite.

"Take in some more nouuuurrrishment, Juuuuuulie." She drew out her words like a genteel southern belle. We used to joke this way early in Mother's career when she'd had a productive day writing.

"I don't understand why it's happening again," I said.

"I do," Mother said quietly. "You need to take a break, Julie. From the writing. You're pushing yourself too hard."

This time it was my turn to stop mid-bite. "But you never took a break, Mother," I said softly.

"You're right," she said. "And I regret it. I regret a lot of things I did when

you and your sister and brothers were little. I've always admired what a good wife and mother you've been. Now you need to put yourself first. Take a break from the book, Julie. It'll still be there when you're ready. And even if you never finish it, no one's going to think you're a failure. We'll all love you just the same."

I looked at her intently and tried to let her words sink in.

The next morning, I got out of bed early and took a walk in the woods around the cabin, something I'd of-

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ten neglected to do since I'd gotten so wrapped up in the novel.

Breathing in the sharp February air, I thought more about what Mother had said. Was it true that she admired the choices I'd made? I hadn't considered them choices at the time. They were just what young women did. Part of the reason I had married so young was because I'd feared I'd fail in college.

Still, Mother was right that I loved Rick and the kids. And she was right that all the people I cared about loved me whether or not I was a "real" writer. Maybe my problem wasn't failure. Maybe I was clinging to this book—to writing—because I was afraid to be just myself. Julie, a beloved child

of God. That didn't feel like enough to me. I had to do more to earn God's love, right?

I looked around the woods. The dogwoods were blooming—a sure sign of spring in the South. A sliver of sunlight filtered through the trees.

I stood in that beam of light and spread my arms wide. "God, I hate how this book is making me feel," I said. "You take it. I'm going to take a break. I'm going to trust that you'll still love me even if all I do every day is rest and read and cook dinner."

I finished the walk and by the time I got home I knew I had made the right choice. Yes, it would take a week or two before the medication took full effect. And it would be even longer

before I felt ready to write again. But something had lifted. Not just a weight but the fear and insecurity that had darkened my view and blocked me from trusting God's persistent love—persistent as those dogwood blooms shrugging off the winter chill.

I went to the kitchen and made some breakfast. My eye fell on a cookbook and I remembered a stew that Rick loved. I'd make that for dinner. In the meantime, I had a lot of reading to catch up on. I started the coffeemaker and thought of the long-neglected stack of books sitting by my reading chair upstairs. Novel or no novel, I trusted that God loved me. For today, that was enough. 