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“Please don’t make me get on that bus!” I pleaded with my husband, Bryan.

“Don’t back out now,” he said as he took my arms from around him, breaking my tight embrace. “If you don’t get help, sweetheart, I’m afraid the kids and I will lose you.”

“But you know I’ve never been anywhere alone. What if the workshop doesn’t help? What if I come back still depressed and with these same thoughts of wanting *out* of this big old world? Then what?”

“*It will help!*” Bryan said, lifting my chin and giving me a peck. “After all, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is an expert on helping people deal with grief. I know it’s hard for you right now, but please think positive about this trip. Heck, you’ll be in the heart of the Catskills where Rip Van Winkle fell asleep for twenty years.”

“I know, but I’d feel better if you and the kids were coming.”

“Hey,” he said. “Do you have *any* idea how much I want to go with you? You know I have to stay to be home with the kids. Heck, you wouldn’t even be going if it weren’t for Father Frank lending us the money to get you there.”

“But I hate being away from the kids. What if something happens when I’m gone?”

“*Nothing will!*” Bryan assured, and called for our sons who were exploring the Greyhound from the bus station window. I stooped to my knees and gathered my four little boys in a big hug. I had planned to keep my tears in storage, as usual, but I cried as I kissed them good-bye.

“You’re coming back, right, Mama?” my seven-year old asked, holding his *Return of the Jedi* figurine.

“Yes, Mama will be back soon,” I managed as I questioned my ability to get to where I was going, *let alone* return home again.

“Come on,” Bryan said, putting his arm around my shoulder and walking me to the door. “They’re waiting on you.” After our final kiss and hug, I started walking out to the bus. He stood with our boys in the doorway. “Don’t go worrying,” he hollered. “My mother will help while you’re away. We plan to have fun!”

I kept my tear-filled hazel eyes firmly on the bus. I feared even one last glance would keep me from getting on. Trembling, I walked to a back seat, purposefully not making eye contact with any passengers. I quietly sat next to the window. Once settled, I placed my Packer blanket over my slender legs and propped my pillow behind my tense neck. It was then that I realized I was the only passenger on the bus leaving Michigan for New York. At first I thought that being alone was an opportunity to empty the reservoir of tears I held within me. But then I thought as I had as a little girl, that I didn’t deserve to cry. After all, what would the driver think if all of a sudden he heard me wailing? A few times over the last twenty-five years I had given in to the sorrowful emotions and it only proved to set me further into the

past. And besides, I reasoned, there's no in-between for me. It's either a few silent tears painfully making their escape; or I wail, bringing others to my rescue. Just last year I'd had a wailing episode. I thought I was alone in the church, but a cleaning woman heard me and rushed to my aid. "What on earth is wrong?" she asked, brushing my long, curly, light-brown hair from my tear-soaked face.

Since that embarrassing outburst, I guarded my emotions closely, for I thought of them as a volcano waiting to erupt. It frightened me to think that even I probably wouldn't know when or where this outburst of emotions would occur or how many people would witness the event. I pushed the painful memories of the past into the cellar of my mind and tried to visualize securing them with a dead-bolt lock, as I had done at other times in my life when the haunting memories came lurking. But as I gazed out the bus window into the darkness of the night, the memories came darting through my mind. Soon I was recalling the events that were responsible for my being in route to the Death, Life, and Transition workshop.

A young mother from my community, the same age as myself, was killed in an automobile accident. It broke my heart to know that her five and six year old were too young to understand that their mother would never return. Nor did it help knowing that they would probably wait for her to come home each day like I had, as a little child, expected my own mother to return. For a whole week after their mother's death, I couldn't sleep. As the days passed, I grew angry knowing that her children would always have a void in their hearts. Even with the distraction of my own children, I couldn't stop thinking and worrying about them. Soon memories of my own past took center stage in my mind. Try as I might to force the old hurt back, the memories began dominating my normal way of thinking until my concentration was dimmed and confused. I was already living in a state of depression and feeling physically, mentally, and emotionally drained, so before long, negative thinking soon enveloped me. Shortly

thereafter, I felt saturated with fear. My family's good-byes became a time of immense grief. When they left each day, I believed I might never see them again. I convinced myself that something would surely happen to them. Or, worse, I might die and leave my children behind, as my mother had left my ten siblings and me. Even a phone call or a knock on the door was cause for panic. "Was someone coming to inform me that my husband or one of my children were dead?" I asked myself so many times.

Years earlier I'd seen a psychologist several times to try to overcome some of the fears I was living with, but he never asked me anything about my childhood. Time was spent working on exploring ways to change the negative behaviors. "I don't practice Freud's ways," he said, on my first visit. "Behavioral Modification is my bag." So to help me overcome claustrophobia, the psychologist assigned me the task of getting into an elevator. One day, I spent nearly two hours in a store, sampling perfume, trying on hats and examining every dress on the rack while trying to build up enough courage to go into the elevator. I'd promised my counselor that I'd at least step into it that day. Going up one floor would be my task for the following week. It had taken me several weeks to get this far. My previous sessions were spent watching a video about people going in and out of elevators. Just watching it made my heart race and my stomach turn until I could hardly breathe.

Desperately I wanted to enter the elevator, but each time I went near it, panic overtook me and soon I was gasping for air. Disappointed in myself, I left believing that I'd never return again. But each week I'd somehow get the courage to drive the thirty miles to town to the only store equipped with an elevator. Each week I'd leave, again, disappointed in myself. Finally, fearing that someday I'd lose my breath completely, I quit trying to overcome my claustrophobia.

After that day my time was spent spewing words of self hate. My inability to conquer even the most menial of tasks was killing every

trace of self-confidence. Even passing by a mirror became an outlet for hateful thought. I despised the thin reflection looking back at me. What little positive self-image I once had soon crumbled. Bringing one of my boys to the doctor, or handling some other similar emergency was the only way I'd venture out of my safe zone. Wanting to give up completely was tempting, but a fragment of hope remained. I needed to get better for my children's sake at least. I longed to be there for them—for their school plays, picnics, concerts, open houses and basketball games—yes, every minute of their life that I could share with them. I didn't want them looking out to an empty parent's chair, the way I'd had to. But as the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months, I felt paralyzed to do anything about it.

Hitting rock bottom, I threw myself to my knees one afternoon and cried out to God for help. It was only a few days later when I read a book called *Working It Through* by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. The book helped me realize that I had not dealt with my mother's death. Only a few nights later I began opening up to Bryan about my childhood. As I shared with him, I didn't quite know what was happening to me. I heard myself talking childlike and realized that I was displaying childish behaviors, but I couldn't control my actions. At times I felt like a spectator to the strange event. Internally I scolded myself for acting so childish. Yet, as I let my story unfold, the child within, obviously aching to be heard, continued to dominate my adult way of thinking. The next morning at Bryan's request I called Father Frank, our parish priest, who in return directed me to seek counseling. On that Monday, Father made me a Friday appointment with a psychologist.

As the days went by, I feared Friday's arrival. "Would counseling be a flop as before?" I wondered. My heart raced in anticipation of the appointment as I tried to carry out my daily tasks. What would I say to the counselor? What would he think when I openly admitted that I thought I had to grieve for my mother who had been dead for years?

When Friday arrived, I mustered up the courage to go to my

appointment, praying that no one would recognize me. My heart beat to the speed of the wipers as I drove through an unexpected storm. The thunder and lightning and the wind and rain scared me. I was about to turn around and go home when suddenly I remembered something that a friend's mother had once told me. "Storms, even the storms of life, are followed by a rainbow." For a complete minute I was at peace and excited to be going to counseling, looking forward to my own personal rainbow.

At the front desk I checked in and took a seat. I lowered my head as I waited for my counselor to call my name. I grabbed a *Time* magazine from a nearby table and opened it. I held it at eye level in hopes of hiding my identity, but when my counselor loudly called me, the magazine flew from my hands. Embarrassed, I grabbed it from the floor, returned it to the table, and then nervously followed him down the hall and into his smoke-filled room. He lit a cigarette and with his back to me pointed to the couch that I assumed I was to sit on. He sat on a swivel chair next to his desk and did paperwork, while continuing to smoke. After crushing the butt in an ashtray, he swiveled around, lit another cigarette and then introduced himself. At his request I spoke a little about myself while he continued to puff away, never once shaking the ash from his cigarette.

"What's on your mind?" he asked after I finished my spiel of how I was married and a mother of four small boys, reciting their names.

I wanted to say it was his long cigarette ash on my mind, but I knew it was probably another diversion to skirt around the truth, so I answered as honestly as possible. "I believe I'm grieving my mother," I very nervously responded.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said, finally flicking the ash. "When did she die?"

"Twenty-five years ago," I hesitantly answered.

He began to chuckle. "And you think you're grieving her *now*!"

"Yes... I... do," my voice choked out.

“Well, I don’t,” he said. “That’s way in the past and *wouldn’t* be affecting the present. Now why don’t you start talking about what’s really bothering you? Let’s get right to the meat and potatoes of it all,” he said, as he crushed his cigarette and then grabbed his nearly empty pack from his desk.

“Please... I’d rather... you not smoke,” I said, very cautiously. “I have asthma.”

“But I have a habit. Which is worse?” he sarcastically answered. With that remark I began to cry.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “If smoking is that offensive to you, I certainly don’t need one. Now let’s get back to what you came here for today.”

“I think I better leave,” I said. Rising from the couch with my hand cupped over my mouth I muttered, “I feel sick.”

“It’s your call,” he said. “But are you sure?” I nodded, so he walked me to the door. “See you next week. And don’t forget, make another appointment.”

On the way out I walked right past the receptionist and ran out the glass doors to the car. Tears flooded my face. I had been so sure that I was on the right track after reading *Working It Through*. Faces of concern glanced through the window as they walked by. Panic was about to overtake me when suddenly an inspiration came. I grabbed a wad of Kleenex, blew my nose, and then dried my eyes. Backing out of the parking lot, I said loudly and with a twinge of sarcasm, “I’ll write to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and ask her what she thinks.”

On my drive home I thought of all the things I would say in my letter. Then, to make sure I wouldn’t forget my thoughts, I wrote the letter shortly after I got home. I told Elisabeth about my visit with the counselor and how terrible it had been. I told of my counselor’s view on things and about my own thoughts of why I was so depressed and fearful. Only a few days passed when Elisabeth’s reply arrived. After reading it, I breathed a sigh of relief. Elisabeth had confirmed

my suspicions and had invited me to the workshop, where I was now headed.

It was November and the first snow of the year was falling. For the Upper Peninsula, this was not unusual. I'd once witnessed snow flurries on a Fourth of July night, so I wasn't surprised. Yet the snow concerned me. Would my family make it home safely?

At the end of Highway 35 the bus slid across the intersection onto Highway 41 and my heart skipped a beat. It wasn't my own safety I feared, but the safety of my husband and children. I quickly reminded myself that the thirty-minute trip home for them had passed and the children would be safely tucked into their beds. Still my throat swelled from forcing back the tears—the tears of present-day worry and fear and tears of past sorrows. City lights soon crept into the darkness of the window view. I took a deep breath. “Will peace ever come to my life?” I asked myself as the bus traveled on.

The snow continued to thicken and, except for the absence of flickering colored lights, it began to look like Christmas everywhere.

“Are you warm enough back there?” the driver hollered. I answered yes twice before he could hear my reply.

“It's beginning to look like Christmas, don't you think?” he asked in what seemed to be an effort to make conversation. Again I answered yes, but with only the slightest movement of my head. I feared if I were to even say a single word, the tears would flow. Since the Christmas of 1960, I had never thought of Christmas as a joyous time of year, so I ignored just how festive the outdoors might be looking. I lay my head against the window, dozed for a few minutes, and upon awakening asked myself, “What was I dreaming?” Something unsettling preyed upon my mind. I closed my eyes again. Suddenly I realized that I had dreamt about my mother's good-bye to my siblings and me when she had left for *her* trip to Chicago. For the first time in days, a smile came upon my face. I thought about my own boys and how they had begged me to take them with to New York, much like my siblings and I had

begged my own mother to take us with her to Chicago. I reclined the seat of the Greyhound and silently prayed that my boys wouldn't miss me as much as I had missed my mother during her absence.

Back home, Bryan lay awake in bed thinking about his wife going off alone to New York. It worried him terribly. Her almost exclusive confinement to the house lately concerned him deeply. Night after night upon his return from work, the same story greeted him. "I'm so tired, Bryan," she'd say. And each morning would bring the same routine. He'd have to convince her that ten hours of sleep was enough and listen to her complain of being too tired to get out of bed. Often, it was *Bryan* who took the first step out of bed for her. With his medium frame he'd lift her into his muscular arms and gently set her feet upon the floor. He loved being with her, but he desperately wanted her to be free of the fear and worry that haunted their lives. It bothered him when she confessed that she was afraid to even go shopping. "What woman doesn't want to shop?" he asked himself, and the red flags of concern went up.

Bryan knew that some of Donna's negative behavior had gotten better over the years, but others had gotten far worse. No matter how much pleading he did, year after year it was the same old story. Even since their earlier days in Germany, when Bryan had been drafted into the army, he had encouraged her to seek help for the things that were tormenting her. But she'd either say that she didn't know what was on her mind or that she had already talked with a counselor and he couldn't help. More recently, Bryan had to ask a friend of hers to come and be with her and the kids because all she'd do was lie on the living room floor—not eating, not speaking.

"Damn!" Bryan said when she refused to move from the floor on the third night. It was the worry Donna detected in his voice that temporarily brought her out of self-absorption and enabled her to sip from the glass of water he held to her mouth. She looked at his face—his

wrinkled brow, his eyes without their usual gleam. She knew he hadn't been getting much sleep lately either. On two different occasions she'd heard his sniffles during the middle of the night. It frightened her because she had never known her husband to cry, except years earlier on the day he had proposed to her. She didn't know what to do or say, so she chose not to talk to him about him crying, like she hadn't talked to him about the evening she heard his angry words as he piled the wood into the basement. "What am I doing to my husband?" she asked herself. And the guilt continued to mount.

Bryan had always surmised that deep within the depression was a sad story waiting to be told. "What happened to the girl I married?" he wondered as he lay staring at the clock. "What happened to the cheerleader, the prom queen, the outgoing girl that had once loved to be around people?" He brushed his brown hair from his forehead and hit the mattress with his fist. "It's three o'clock. I have to work tomorrow!" Then he continued scolding himself. "If only I could have helped her, I wouldn't have had to send her off on that bus alone." But as the night slipped by, he admitted that he was glad she was finally gone to seek help. He knew that lately she had let herself go, and this behavior, of all her negative behaviors, scared him most. Typically, she took pride in her appearance, dressing her five-foot-five frame in clothes of style—not expensive clothes—but clothes of good taste. He admired her ability to French braid her own hair and her wisdom in choosing hairstyles that complimented her age. He loved it when she dressed feminine. He recalled one evening earlier in the year when he'd convinced her to go out dancing.

"I'm not quite ready," she exclaimed, as he entered their bedroom. "I still have my face to do." Bryan watched as she lengthened her short eyelashes with mascara and then carried out the rest of the make-up procedure. "I have to hide my ugliness," she smirked, as she grabbed a piece of paper from a notepad to blot her plum colored lips with. Bryan walked to the mirror. Gently he placed his callused hands

upon her soft, rouged cheeks. “You’re not hiding your ugliness; you’re bringing out your beauty.” She turned from the compliment, which had not surprised him. She had never been able to take a compliment, then or now.

Bryan tossed and turned as the memories of the previous weeks floated through his mind. He relived the conversations that had brought his wife to agree to attend the workshop—the workshop where she’d, hopefully, deal with the unfinished business left over from childhood. He recalled the first night of the conversations and how it had started as a typical night. He tucked the boys into bed, folded the laundry, put the linens in the bathroom closet then continued on to the master bedroom. He assumed she’d be sleeping as usual, but to his surprise he found her sitting at the foot of the bed when he opened the door. Instinctively, he sensed something wrong. It had been fifteen years since he’d seen her in pigtails. He raised his thick eyebrows and was about to ask, “Why pigtails?” when out of the blue she started telling him about her past. Her childlike manner took him by surprise. Not just in her body language, but in the manner of her speech. She was talking in a voice like that of a little girl, and this behavior put a scare into him, making him wonder what might be next. Was she having a breakdown? he questioned. If not, he guessed she was surely standing on the threshold of one.

“She couldn’t let us go.”

“Who couldn’t let you go?” Bryan asked.

“Mama. I asked if I could go with her to Chicago. But, ‘No,’ she said, ‘you’re too little, Donna Jean. You’re not even seven.’ My sister Bernadette threw her little white prayer book onto Mama’s bed. ‘I’m eight, can I go with you?’ My oldest sister Sarah thought she should be the one to go, because she was nine, but Mama still said, ‘No.’ And when my three little sisters started begging to go, Mama almost cried. Suddenly John, Luke, and Mark came running in the house. ‘Can we go with you too, Ma?’ they hollered. ‘Oh me, oh my,’ she said.

They wanted to go so they could see our oldest brother Matthew. He was eighteen and living in Chicago with Auntie Celia. ‘I’m sorry, but none of you can come with,’ Mama said. She knelt down and put her arms around my three little sisters and then looked at everybody and said, ‘There won’t be any room.’”

“See, at first, even Mama didn’t know if she’d get to go to Chicago. But she wanted to go real bad so she could go to my Godmother’s wedding. When she asked Dad what he thought, Dad said, ‘I’d like to say go, but I don’t think we have money to send you there.’”

“But,” Mama said, and her bottom lip started to quiver, “I’ve never... been able to see Matthew... since... he moved from home!” Mama put her hands over her eyes. My dad took her hands and kissed them and said, “Well, maybe we can flip a coin and if you win, you can go!” Then he got up from the chair and walked toward the refrigerator. “Maybe there’s a coin in the yellow glass teapot.”

“The yellow glass teapot that always gets the money?” I asked.

“The yellow glass teapot with the broken cover?” Bernadette said.

My sisters didn’t break the cover to the yellow glass teapot. And I didn’t break the cover. No, way! My brothers broke the cover of the yellow glass teapot. One day Luke and John were throwing their baseball in the kitchen. Mama asked them not to. Then Mama told them not to throw the ball, but John kept saying, “Just one more time. Come on, Ma, let us play!” And Luke said, “Just let us throw it once more, Ma, then we’ll quit.”

“For heaven’s sake Luke, you’re fourteen, and John, you’re twelve. By now you boys should know better! You’ll end up breaking something!” All of a sudden CRASH, BOOM, BANG! Luke and John made the yellow glass teapot fall off the refrigerator. I heard it hit the floor. Mama ran to the teapot. She knelt by it and picked up the cover. I heard her say, “No, no, not my yellow glass teapot. It’s the only thing I have left from my wedding day!”

“It’s only the cover, Ma,” Luke said, “I’ll glue it.”

“You’ll never be able to fix it!” she said. “It’s got one big piece out of it now, and that piece is all broken up.” Mama’s shaky hands set the broken cover back on top the teapot and then she put the teapot back on top the refrigerator. Next she took the broom from the corner of the room. I thought she was going to sweep up the yellow glass, but she took the broom and booted the boys out of the house with it. “If I catch either of you in the house before it’s time to eat, I’ll have you both kneeling in corners!” The boys went running, and then Mama swept the glass off the kitchen floor.

The day after John and Luke broke the cover was the day that my dad made my sisters and me go outside to find a caterpillar. See, after Dad came in from doing barn chores, he said, “It’s sure a nice day! You kids are going outside this morning!” Then he went to the washbasin. I watched my dad wash up and then put lots of sudsy soap on his face. Next he took his shaver and cut off all his picky whiskers. Then he went into the kitchen. I followed him. Mama was putting dishes up into the cabinet and my dad went up behind her. He hugged her around her skinny belly. I saw him whisper something into her ear. Mama turned around and smiled at my dad and nodded her head. Then Dad turned around and said, “All right you girls...outside with your brothers!”

Dad wouldn’t even let *Monica* stay in the house. He made us take her outside with us.

“We don’t want to pile wood with the boys!” we cried.

“You girls don’t have to pile wood,” he said, handing Bernadette a Mason jar that had a cover with holes in it. “Go find a caterpillar and put it in this jar.”

“What if we can’t find a caterpillar?” I said.

“Just look and look, you’ll find one,” he said as he opened the door. “Keep an eye on your sisters,” he yelled to the boys. “Make sure they stay in the yard.”

We looked and looked and looked for a caterpillar. Monica found the button off Mama's long gray coat and Sarah found Catherine's doll that Catherine thought had been stolen at school. Sarah saw its arm sticking out from under a pile of snow. We got tired of looking, so we watched Luke and John punch down our shrinking snowman. Then we started looking again for a caterpillar. We looked under stones, boards and tree branches and by the barn too, but we still couldn't find one. Finally, I spotted a night crawler creeping out of a big mud puddle.

"Let's put the night crawler inside the jar!" I said.

"A night crawler isn't a caterpillar," Bernadette said. "Caterpillars are fuzzy." But Bernadette took a stick and she lifted the night crawler up and into the jar anyway. Sarah screwed the cover on and Bernadette tucked the jar under her arm. Sarah lifted Monica and I grabbed Anna's hand and we ran to the house. Dad was looking out the window of the door, brushing his hair from his forehead, when he saw us coming. He opened the door and took the jar from Bernadette and then looked inside of it. We didn't make a peep.

"Ah-ha," Dad said, "you found a bald caterpillar!" Then, to our surprise, he said, "Everyone is going outside this afternoon, too. Even your mother says that she can come with us!"

"Yippee!" we screamed.

So after lunch we went outside again. First Dad had us help him pile wood and then help him clean up the yard. Mama just played. I watched her make a snowball and then throw it right at Dad. It knocked his hat off. "Hey!" Dad said, running over by the shed where there was still snow. "Two can play this game!" Mama dashed away, but he caught her, laid her on the ground and rubbed the snow onto her face. Then she rubbed snow onto his face. They laughed and laughed. We saw Dad kiss Mama right on her lips. Sarah started singing the K-I-S-S-I-N-G song, so all six of us sang together. When Dad stood up, he rubbed his hands together and said, "It's Holy Saturday! What do you say we all go collect holy water, like the early Christians used to do?"

“Where will we find holy water?” I asked.

“Well, get in the car,” he said, “and I’ll show you.” So we piled into the car and Dad took us to the Valentine Creek. On the way he told us how, on Holy Saturday morning, the early Christians would go get water from a river and then bring it to the church to have it blessed. Dad had taken a jar to the Valentine and he let us take turns filling our hands with water and dumping the water into the jar. My brothers thought it was dumb. They wouldn’t do it. When the jar was filled, we took the water to Father Dishaw and Dad asked him to bless it. When we got home, Mama sprinkled the house with the holy water.

“Is our house dry, like the clothes that need ironing?” I asked.

Mama laughed. “No, I’m asking God’s blessings upon our house so that we will love God with all our heart, mind and soul, and to keep us safe from harm.” Then she made a sign-of-the-cross on each of our foreheads and asked God’s blessings on us, too. And every Sunday after church she blessed us again, and our house, too, until all the holy water was gone.

That was a long, long, time ago, so I asked Dad if he’d take us to get more holy water. I wanted to bless Mama so she’d be safe if she got to go to Chicago. “It’s June,” Dad said. “It’s been too hot. The water in the Valentine is dried up.” I followed Dad to the kitchen. “Stand back,” he said. He reached on top of the refrigerator and took down the yellow glass teapot.

“What are you doing, Dad?” I asked.

“I’m looking for a coin to flip, to see if your mother gets to go to Chicago, or not,” he said, winking at me. He lifted the broken cover off the teapot and turned the teapot upside down. An Indian-head nickel fell out. He took the nickel and flipped it over and over and over in his hands. Then he said to Mama, “If the Indian-head lands up, you’ll get to go to Chicago, but if the buffalo lands up, you’ll have to stay home.”

Dad smiled, Mama cried, and I screamed, “Don’t go Mama, don’t

go!” when I saw the Indian-head land on the floor. Mama hurried to her bedroom and looked inside her dresser to see what she could take to wear.

“I only have a couple pieces of clothes that are good enough,” she said to Dad.

“You better bring cool clothes. It’s hot in Chicago during June, a lot hotter than here,” he said.

“But I don’t have much of anything that fits now. I wear your big shirts around the house when I’m expecting, but I don’t want to bring those to Chicago. Oh, well,” Mama said, “what I have will have to do!”

“So how did your mother get to Chicago?” Bryan asked Donna that night when she opened up to him about her past. She was still sitting at the foot of their bed and didn’t seem to hear his question and continued talking in the same peculiar way.