

The Love That Opened the Door

“Blue days” had ruled my mother’s life. And mine

By **JEANNIE HUGHES**
Hurricane, West Virginia

Scene 1: I was nine years old that Friday night. We were about to sit down to dinner, but I wasn’t looking forward to it. It was another of my mother’s “blue days,” as we called them, when she seemed to be only a shadow of herself. In truth, these blue days often stretched into weeks.

“Should we wait on Jimmy?” my sister-in-law asked. Jimmy was my dad.

“No,” my mother said. “He can eat whenever.”

On blue days, my mother didn’t really react to anything. She didn’t seem to care that my father worked late and

EMBRACING BEAUTY Therapy and medication helped Jeannie see a brighter world.

PHOTOS BY SCOTT GOLDSMITH

usually holed up in the basement after he came home. When the anger rose from her, it scared me.

My brother, who had left home as soon as he was old enough, quickly gestured for us to take our places at the table. He was 10 years older than me, and I felt so alone in this house without him.

We stared at our plates waiting for my mother to say something. Not grace. We didn't do that. Then the phone rang. My mother got up and answered. I was sure it was my father on the line. They had been arguing earlier today. "If you call again," Mom suddenly shouted, "I'll jerk this phone out of the wall!"

I froze, sick to my stomach. I knew she would do it too.

Mom sat down, and thick silence enveloped us. We passed dishes, the metal clink of the serving spoon stinging my nerves. I tried to take a mouthful of pot roast, but it was no use. I just

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wanted to run and hide in my closet. I did that a lot those days.

Finally, my sister-in-law spoke, cautiously. "I read that there are new pills you can take for—you know—your blue days. No different really than the pills people take for blood pressure." I cringed inside. My sister-

in-law had no idea of the mistake she had just made.

Mom's words fell from her mouth. "I will not take happy pills. There is nothing wrong with me."

I wondered if her anger had been an effort to break free of her blue day, as if she were trying to punch through it. Because here's the thing: More than anyone in my family, I knew deep down how Mom felt.

Scene 2: I knelt alone in the church sanctuary, the dimness a familiar comfort, like the closet where I used to hide when I was little. Hiding from what I was never able to say then, from the feelings that threatened to swallow me whole. But I guess you can't hide from yourself.

A gentle light illuminated the cross behind the pulpit where my brother preached. I was a high schooler, and he led this small church—surprising because we were not a particularly religious family. In my closet, I'd blindly reached out to some power greater than myself, some loving force to help me understand what was wrong with me, or simply to end my suffering.

"God," I prayed now, "if you are the God of love that my brother says you are, please send that love to help me."

That word *love*. What did it mean? Our family rarely said that word to each other. And when we did it was mechanical.

The frequency of Mom's blue days

had leveled off, and their intensity lessened—or so it seemed. "If I'm feeling down, I just tell myself to snap out of it!" she'd say. But her words were hollow. They held the echo of everything that was turning inside her... and in me.

I too tried to tell myself to snap out of it, like a lion tamer cracking a whip. The more I tried to isolate myself from my feelings, the darker the cloud that hung over me, the more that cloud isolated me.

In this sanctuary, though, the word *love* felt so real. I knew it was God breaking through to me. He knew who I was!

When I got home, still floating on that feeling, I asked my mother, "Is there someone I can talk to about how sad I sometimes feel?"

"Why, Jeannie, you have me to talk to. We can talk to each other. We'll just tell ourselves to be happy! No one needs to know."

I turned away. What could I do now? I was too old to hide in that closet.

Scene 3: I traveled through life the best I knew how. Some days, I felt as if I were swimming through mud. But I'd learned from my mother's mistakes. I hid my feelings better. I didn't even think about them. I just put on a happy face. There were more important things than the way I felt.

I married, had two beautiful children, a son and a daughter, divorced. I got a job at city hall as an accounting clerk, always keeping up with the

endless work. I married a good man named Roger and moved on. Though it didn't feel as if I had. I couldn't move on from myself.

Scene 4: "Jeannie, my phone won't work," my mother said.

"If your phone isn't working, then how are you talking to me on it?"

"I don't know," she said. "It's just not working."

I sighed. "I'll come check it out," I said. Mom was showing signs of dementia. *We'll just push through it*, I told myself. After my dad died, my mother had moved seven doors down from me. I looked in on her every day. "I'm going to stop by with your dinner early today too."

I used my spare key to let myself into her house through the laundry room, off the garage.

"Mom, look," I called. "I'm putting navy beans and corn bread in your refrigerator. I'll be back to warm up everything later, and then we can eat together."

"Sounds good," she said.

"Let me check out your phone." I used my cell to test hers, knowing it would ring. "All fixed," I told her.

"Good. Thank you!"

I came back two hours later. As soon as I opened the door, I knew her mood had changed. The house was dark. "Mom? Why are there no lights on?"

"I like the dark," she said from the couch.

A familiar chill ran through me.

"At least we'll have a nice dinner to-

gether,” I said. I flipped on the lights and opened the refrigerator. “Mom? What happened to the beans and corn bread I brought over?”

“Who knew how long they’d been sitting there? I tossed them,” Mom said with a dull finality.

I felt so defeated. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I wanted to be someone else.

Scene 5: In the sanctuary of my brother’s church, my eyes fixed on my mother’s casket. The white roses atop it were beautiful yet somehow incongruous. *I hope she’s in a happier place at last*, I thought. *No more blue days*. Mom and I may not have known how to love each other, but she was an overpowering presence in my life, and we shared things we could never speak about. The last eight months of her life, she’d fallen into the abyss of Alzheimer’s. I’d moved in with her, caring for her full-time while also supporting Roger as he underwent cancer treatments.

I felt like a shadow of myself. It had been five years since I’d even been inside a church. I’d given up on God. He’d given up on me, and I didn’t blame him. Roger reached for my hand and squeezed it, bringing me back to the words of the eulogy.

“I only wish she had received help for her mental illness,” I heard my brother saying. What? Why was he calling our mother mentally ill?

After the service, I asked him. “What did you mean, mentally ill?”

“Well, she *was* clinically depressed,”



FEELING LIGHTER Jeannie hopes her story will inspire others dealing with depression to get help. “It’s been life-changing,” she says.

my brother said, his voice calm, non-judgmental. “It’s a mental illness. She couldn’t help what she was going through. She needed therapy, medication, help. She was afraid to ask for it.”

A voice rose up inside me. I tried to stop the words before they came out. “Do you think that’s what’s wrong with me?” I blurted.

My brother looked at me quizzically. I’d done such a good job hiding how I really felt, even from the people closest to me.

Scene 6: I started going to church because Roger seemed to get something out of it. Listening to preachers go on about God left me despondent. I’d spent the years since Mom’s death grieving the loss of my 21-year-old son. To me, every day felt just like the day of his freak car accident. I was almost grateful to my mother for teaching me how to conceal my grief. No

one knew. No one needed to know. It was my problem.

As I entered the sanctuary that morning, an older woman I’d never spoken to pressed an envelope into my hand. “You always look so sad,” she said. “I feel moved to give you this.”

Sitting in the pew, I opened the envelope. Inside was a card for a psychologist. “Why would she give me this?” I asked Roger. I was shocked. How did the woman know? No one was supposed to know.

Scene 7: A stranger prying into my life. What was I thinking? I wanted to run, to hide. Yet as soon as I sat down and the therapist offered me a glass of water, I sensed something in me start to release. *Stay*, something whispered.

“Write down 10 things that make you happy,” she said.

I wrote my daughter’s name. Then Roger’s. I stopped, shook my head. I could have cried if I had let myself.

“It’s okay,” the therapist said. “Let’s start there.”

Scene 8: Over time, the memories poured out. About everything. Especially my mother.

They weren’t all bad. I remembered when there would be lemon pie waiting when I got home from school. How sometimes she joined us neighborhood kids for a game of four square. But the blue days had ruled her life. Just as they’d ruled mine.

“Your mother didn’t choose to be depressed,” my therapist told me,

“and neither did you. Mental illness can run in families. It’s no one’s fault. Medication and lifestyle changes will help you tremendously, Jeannie. And time. You’ll see. You don’t have to be that little girl in the closet.”

Scene 9: I was there again, a last memory, alone in the closet of my childhood bedroom, alone in the dark and the silence, hiding. Pleading, “Oh, God, take this sadness or take me.” But now that memory changed. I saw a light shine down on me and words that had meaning but no sound. *You are loved*. Love that had followed me all my life even as I struggled. Love that opened that closet door.

Scene 10: As the organist played the postlude for the Sunday service, I stood and extended a hand to the young woman seated next to me. “Peace,” I said and felt her hand tighten around mine. This moment, the passing of the peace, held such meaning for me now. Not just a word but a feeling I’d never imagined possible, certainly not in church.

Afterward, Roger and I walked together through a park teeming with the color of spring flowers—flowers that my mother might have loved on a good day. Might have yearned to love somewhere inside her soul. My mother had done the best she could. I could forgive her now knowing she was as much a child of God as I was. That, finally, was the love we could share. ❧