Waiting to Hear

“Momma”
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A MOTHER’S MEMOIR

Lucille Messina
What if your child could never say “Momma” or your child could never say “Daddy”?

This compelling true story chronicles a mother’s faith and unconditional love journey through fear, anger, deep depression, guilt, loneliness, and discrimination while caring for her special child. As a reader, you are transported into the highs and lows encountered in the healthcare system, government, and business world as they impacted their lives. It tells how this mother was thrust into a world that she never knew existed, where doctors were not gods who could fix everything.

*Waiting to Hear “Momma”* is a memoir by a mother of a special child who finds herself struggling to survive. The yearning of a mother to hear “Momma” is deep and emotional, with a bond that goes beyond the spoken word. Communication can be non-verbal and sometimes sealed within, where only two people in the entire world speak the same language.
“The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places.”

—Ernest Hemingway
To my husband, Karl: You are my rock that held our family together. I dedicate this to you, because without your love, patience, devotion, and logical approach, our family could not have survived. You are one in a million.
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Prologue

The bathtub is filling up with warm water, and Jacklyn is lying on her side, enjoying the soothing and caressing warmth of the slow-rippling flow. Her eyes are wide open as she listens to the whooshing sounds coming from the faucet. I’m giving her a bath as I focus on her back and the curve that is twisting her body. My fingers run along her spine as if I could mentally transform this bend into a straight line. I carefully wash her beautiful auburn hair, making sure not to get a single drop of shampoo into her eyes. At eight years old, she has grown to fill more than half the length of the tub.

After a few minutes, she seems uncomfortable but cannot verbalize her distress, so I interpret in ways others do not understand and place the wash towel on her pale shoulders to give her extra warmth. I analyze her every movement, every facial and bodily signal. She raises her fisted hands to her face and appears to be soothed while uttering a low grunt. I kiss her cheek and say, “I love you” before lifting and wrapping her
thin frame into a large towel. She has put on weight, and I’m glad for that, but I know each lift becomes more concerning. Next, I cradle her in my arms to give her my own body heat as we both sit on the bathroom floor. Meanwhile, this gives me a moment to rest my arms, back, and legs, hurting from the strain. Now, as I am rocking her in my arms, I think back to the transformation from a naïve mother to who I have become today.
“We know what we are but know not what we may be.”
—William Shakespeare
Sweeping the Clouds Away

Karl was off to work, and I was starting to get accustomed to the routine of being a new mother—a mother of a beautiful baby girl. It was still hard for me to wrap my mind around the fact that I was a mother, that I had a baby to raise, to teach, to love. She had completed us; we were a family, to enjoy boundless hours of wonder and delight. Jacklyn would soon be four months old. I reviewed the *TV Guide* for children’s shows and was pleased with the future possibilities my baby would enjoy. *Sesame Street* was on the top of my list, followed by *Muppet Babies, Fraggle Rock, Thomas and Friends, Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood, and Reading Rainbow*. Today, we cuddled while *Sesame Street* was on TV, and I read her nursery rhymes. While pinching each toe, I chanted, “This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home . . .”

She fell asleep after her morning bottle. I was content just holding her in my arms. I was utterly mesmerized by her. Her soft wrinkles, folds of chubby skin, and rosy cheeks—a
true gift from God. I inhaled with my lips on her forehead, trying to breathe in all of her. She smelt so fresh, a floral and vanilla scent, with such tiny hands and feet. She had the darkest of auburn hair, upon which I could already place a small hair clip.

It turned out to be a bright, crisp winter morning, so I decided to place Jacklyn in her playpen before tackling chores: doing our laundry, catching up on housecleaning, and writing thank-you notes for many of the baby gifts kept me occupied. I located my Aunt Carol and Uncle Tony’s gift of a white, blue, and orange Raggedy Ann doll and placed it over the playpen, so Jacklyn could see it. She stared at it for an hour!

The next day was January 12, 1985, and it started out as a chilly weekend. A bit of frost covered the lawn. Karl and his brother Ken had planned to go cod fishing off Long Island. It was a simple pleasure that they both enjoyed from childhood. He left around 4:00 a.m. as I wished him good luck.

Later in the morning, I fed Jacklyn breakfast before searching her closet for a new outfit. First, I started flipping through the top rack, and then I started on the second row. Finally, happy with my decision, I chose the red corduroy pants and white turtleneck sweater with multi-colored hearts on it. I brushed her dark auburn hair up into a tiny little pony tail and placed a matching multi-colored heart Velcro hair tie to secure it. She smelted like baby powder, and her skin felt satin soft and new. I admired and caressed her tiny toes before putting ruffled white socks on her feet. All this was happening as we
could hear the *Sesame Street* theme song “Sunny Day” playing in the next room. I loved to sing to her this happy tune.

The melody ended, and, while she was still on the changing table mat, something happened. Her face changed to a grimace, her skin turned blue, and her eyes twitched. The contortion of the right side of her little face was more intense as I watched in horror. “Jacklyn, Jacklyn!” I yelled, but she was unresponsive. She appeared not to be breathing during this episode. The wind knocked out of me, I froze. Feeling faint, my hands clenched the table. I started to tremble uncontrollably, my stomach turned—something was very wrong. I laid my hand over her tiny chest while gasping for air.

I don’t know how many seconds or minutes passed. Her normal color and breathing returned. I rushed and called my mother-in-law to get word to Karl out at the dock when the boat returned to shore. My mother-in-law calmly told me that I should go directly to the hospital. Her cool composure settled me down just enough to act. I picked up Jacklyn, grabbed the diaper bag, and ran out the door to my car. I found myself constantly looking in the back seat to make sure she was conscious and breathing. I prayed that I would not get into an accident. I repeated the Hail Mary and Our Father. My body felt numb, and I don’t remember physically driving my car to the children’s hospital.

There I was, standing at the emergency room door, as Jacklyn was transported onto a hospital bed while I was asked numerous questions. Within seconds, she was rushed past a room filled with waiting patients. A team of doctors
surrounded her to the point that she was obscured from my sight. I paced back and forth until I noticed Karl rushing into the room. He was disheveled; his hair was matted down with perspiration, and his fishing jacket was filthy. Fear was clearly evident on his face.

As the hospital’s team prepared for Jacklyn’s admission, I felt like I was watching a movie—not part of the script, isolated, and alone. Doctors and nurses appeared to be moving back and forth in slow motion. Numbness and denial took hold of my body. Within hours my life had been turned upside down. What had just happened to my baby?

I watched as Karl filled out paperwork and talked to the hospital staff. He looked shaken, occasionally glancing my way. His eyes had a wild, glazed look I’d never seen until today. My husband—my rock, never rattled, always calm in any situation—was not the same man.

Trying to calm myself, I thought, *We are in a very good hospital with excellent doctors, and they will fix whatever problem has developed. Since I’m a new, inexperienced mother, I probably didn’t properly handle my newborn correctly. Maybe she had an allergic reaction to something, or maybe I was mistaken, and she was just having a difficult bowel movement. She has been eating well and gaining weight, and, therefore, this is just a panic attack on my part.* I reassured myself that everything would be resolved and back to normal very soon.

The hospital released her after days of tests and said her EEG was normal but that her eyes were not tracking objects. We needed to follow up with various doctors in the next few
weeks. I had to be patient and have complete trust that the future visits would set things right.

During the next few days, I did not see another episode. My daily routine to observe her tracking objects was relentless—to the point I thought I was going insane. Yes, she was, no she wasn’t, then yes, then no. At times, my face would be an inch from her eyes as I looked intently, searching for the slightest movement or reaction—until I didn’t know if I was truly witnessing something or if my imagination was playing tricks on me. One day, after more attempts, I tried to relax and erase the frightening thoughts that were racing through my mind—terrifying visions of her future. Resting my head on the kitchen table, I closed my eyes. I started to float back to the carefree days when I was pregnant—those lighthearted days, filled with innocence and lofty expectations.

I thought back to the summer of 1984. We’d attended all the Lamaze classes, and I started to think about my own delivery. I did not handle pain well, and the prospect of an episiotomy depicted in the video shown in class scared the hell out of me. Karl was calm and supportive every day, with a Rubik’s Cube being his favorite source of relaxation.

I was surprised with a baby shower and was overjoyed with the adorable baby toys and clothing. At the shower, my niece Roseann conveyed her personal childbirth experience to me. She said it would be like having bad cramps—certainly
reassuring news for me to hear. During the following weeks, my worried emotions eased with the anticipation of such a precious gift as I felt this new life kicking within me. Seeing my baby’s movements as I curiously watched my belly ripple and move from within was like a dream coming true.

The nursery was near completion. The oak changing table, dresser, and canopy crib had been delivered. A teddy bear theme for the nursery was perfect. The musical mobile, crib blanket, lamp, and wall décor all had a brown bear dressed in a striped pink, green, blue, yellow, and white nightshirt and matching hat. Placing the cute big brown bear wall décor, with its comforting eyes, was important to me. I positioned it right over our baby’s bed, so it would be a calming sight when our little one looked up. I dreamed of our child’s first steps, recitals, Disney trips, first word, school plays, and on and on. Our newborn, the expression of our love, would be here soon.

I read that the first child arrives later than predicted. I was naïve; my water broke two weeks earlier than expected. I don’t know if all my nesting activities caused this to happen, but I’m sure cooking trays of lasagna to freeze for the planned christening didn’t help. I wasn’t packed for the hospital. That was unusual for us because, as a couple, we planned for everything. Overhearing Karl’s conversation with the doctor’s answering service, I could tell we had to wait until the office was open. We quickly packed an overnight bag, and then I returned to the bedroom. After another contraction, I heard Karl starting to mow the lawn. What is he doing? He’s crazy! How could he time me?
The pain was extreme, and I wasn’t handling it well. It was a warm day, and the windows were open as the fresh air filled the room along with the smell of newly cut grass. An hour passed, and we finally were on our way to the doctor’s office as I sporadically punched the ceiling of the car with each excruciating abdominal cramp. Karl confessed to me that he was timing my contractions as he mowed the lawn. He could clearly hear my screams of pain from outside the house—over the noise of the lawnmower!

The doctor’s waiting room was crowded with mothers-to-be and their families. They were exchanging small talk while some children played with each other. All the seats were occupied, and there was a lively mood in the air. I quickly rushed into my doctor’s office without screaming. The timing was just right. The doctor’s longtime assistant carefully guided me into the exam room. Upon examination, I was informed it was time to head for the hospital. After I dressed, a tremendous wave of pain hit me. “Give me something! Give me something!” I yelled and screamed. I continued requesting pain medication as I was hunched over and repeatedly punched the exam table with my fists. After the pain subsided, I turned and realized the exam room door was open for everyone to hear me roar.

As Karl helped me to the car, we had to pass through the waiting room again. This time I took notice of all those happy young mothers-to-be I had seen earlier. Now, it was dead silent, and each of these ladies had buried their faces in the various magazines they provide in a doctor’s waiting room. I
didn’t see anyone’s face as I exited the room. No one uttered a sound or looked at me, and for that, I was thankful. All I kept sensing was that this experience was not going to be “just bad cramps,” as my niece Roseann suggested. She’d hardly had any pain—three pushes and she was done.

After eight hours of labor, Jacklyn was born on September 25th. Choosing her name was a work of art. I picked “Jack” to honor my father, who had passed many years prior. Since my father-in-law was named “Jasper,” it was also fitting and honored him as well. I added “lyn” to put the finishing female touch to it.

Arriving home with our new baby was joyous. My hopes and dreams had come true. Karl and I gladly shared our funny moments of the event with all our friends and family visitors. Life was good.
“Just Pray She Is Only Blind”

We spent countless hours attempting to witness Jacklyn track objects; finally, we made an appointment to have her eyes checked at the children’s hospital. Within weeks, Jacklyn had numerous eye tests taken, and we had a follow-up arranged to hear the results. As we sat in the waiting room, I watched the other children playing. I started to notice some differences. The babies sat up, turned, and grabbed at toys that their older siblings were holding. I thought, Jacklyn is just low key compared to the other children. All babies have different temperaments; Jacklyn is just quiet and calm. She doesn’t fuss or cry a great deal. I’m a lucky mother to have such a tranquil child.

We finally were called into the office. The doctor said he detected clinical delays and that her vision response test was abnormal. He also indicated that the EEG was normal at the point in time it was taken. This did not mean she did not have a seizure disorder. He spoke about delays in development; but, as a new mother, I was oblivious as to what
the doctor was alluding to. Maybe I was hearing only what I wanted to hear.

The folder we brought that contained the recent medical data now had additional notes from Karl regarding this visit. Upon exiting the office, Karl safely tucked this growing stack of papers into his briefcase. He paused as we were leaving the hospital’s front entrance and turned to me. His facial expression was different, not like anything that I had seen before. Looking into my eyes, he said that I should “... just pray she is only blind!”

I felt like someone had punched me in my stomach, but it was just Karl’s bluntly delivered way of waking me up to reality. Shocked, I sensed myself slipping, descending into a dark hole. Mentally, I needed a wall, one so high that no negative comments from Karl or anyone else could reach me. Alone in my own little private world, all the terms discussed earlier by the doctors came back to me in images—of her alone, walking with a cane, of her in a wheelchair, of her shaking violently from a convulsion. The awful terminology I’d previously dismissed flashed past in dreamlike visions, as if I were on a merry-go-round: going around with no way of getting off. I saw the frightening pictures over and over again with each turn. Nevertheless, I held on for dear life, clutching the pole on the horse to keep me from being thrown off.

We drove home in silence. That night, I made dinner, with Karl’s help, but all I could remember was how red wine can dull a horrible pain.

Jacklyn was put on phenobarbital to manage any seizures. Weeks passed, and we found ourselves back in the hospital
for the second time because her seizures had become uncontrollable. The medicine was not working! The seizures were brief—lasting less than one minute. Sometimes it appeared as a noticeable startle or a very scared look on her face and her arms stiffening. Other times they were more violent, with her entire body jerking upward and her face twitching. I had witnessed her seizing every few minutes until she fell asleep. Her body was exhausted from the one to ten daily episodes. With every seizure I witnessed, a little piece of me died. Each time, it added another brick to the wall that was growing higher to shield me.

The hospital’s neurologist entered Jacklyn’s room and started reviewing her charts. He decided to change her medication to control the convulsions. I asked him what other kinds of tests could be done, and his response was to “bring her back in two years if she is still alive.” Staring at him with my mouth open, I was speechless.

What did he just say to me? My mind raced, and it struggled to make sense of what had just happened. This can’t be true. As her parents, we were both healthy, and nothing in our families would have indicated any problems. I even had an amniocentesis because of my age. I couldn’t move, transfixed, still staring, while the doctor walked out of the room. Now horrific visions flashed before my eyes as I found myself leaning on Karl, who was at my side.

This was the beginning of the mourning I felt over the loss of a healthy child. I felt an overwhelming sense of doom of what now could be my daughter’s future in contrast to what it should have been. My dream shattered into pieces. Each
Each anticipated moment that should have been joyful was falling before me, now broken and crushed into fragments of her life’s potential. There had to be a reason and a solution—and I needed to know what it was, very soon, before it was too late.

An Early Intervention preschool program was offered to us during this most recent hospital visit. I eagerly took advantage of the program, as this intervention would help her in range of motion and sense of balance, and it would help drain excess mucus from her lungs. Since she was missing visual stimulation, it would help her get on track. I received a phone call from a physical therapist who was assigned to Jacklyn’s case. We made an appointment for the following week.

It was a chilly morning, around 10:00 a.m., and Jacklyn had a light breakfast. She was six months old and unable to sit up. I was instructed not to overfeed her because the therapy session might upset her stomach. She had been experiencing reflux, and we didn’t want to cause her any more distress.

Avoiding the seriousness of the situation, I started searching her closet for a cute outfit. I dressed her in a new, beautiful pink-and-white dress and white tights—just one of many gifts she’d received. She looked like a little doll as I put the finishing touches on my precious baby girl. A little pink hair clip in her auburn hair that matched her dress was all I needed to complete the job.

Karl was at work, and I was anticipating Jacklyn’s first therapy session. This intervention was unquestionably going
to help her. My hopes and expectations for the therapy was the much-needed boost that would extinguish my fears and give Jacklyn the best opportunity to overcome her illness.

As I held Jacklyn in my arms, I glanced out the window and saw a car pull up. They were on time. Two young ladies, one blonde, the other brunette, exited the car with two large bags of equipment. They entered the house and introduced themselves as Alice and Cheryl. I offered them refreshments. I was in hostess mode since we’d had many friends and family visitors over the past few weeks. They declined and proceeded to ask questions and jotted down notes.

Next, they requested that I remove her new pink dress and put her in a loose one-piece outfit. Cheryl said many parents make this mistake and don’t realize exactly what is involved during a physical therapy session. My mood changed soon after satisfying her request. I watched as they placed her over a large ball to give her vestibular stimulation. They explained it would help her sense of balance.

Next was postural drainage. By getting her in positions and then gently “clapping” her chest, it would make it easier for mucus to drain from her lungs. I tried to learn and took some notes, but it became too much for me to see—too much for me to accept. Removing myself, I walked into the kitchen. I needed to visualize what the future would be when she improved. Then, with clenched fists, I fantasized about baby play dates as most new mothers would be experiencing now, only to be summoned back by Cheryl requesting extra cloths—“to soak up drool and reflux discharge.” Re-entering the
room with the extra towels, I was forced to see Jacklyn draped over the large rubber ball, struggling to raise her little head. Her tiny arms were next to her chest as she tried desperately to push up while they cheered, “Come on, Jacklyn—you can do it!”

Alice and Cheryl made routine visits. They suggested a beanbag chair for her, and we quickly purchased a beige one. It became her comfy chair; it helped with the postural-drainage therapy and was a source of alternative seating. Jacklyn was turning nine months old, and I learned how to keep her lungs clear, help her sense of balance, and what type of tactile stimulation would be useful. It was not unusual to have feathers, furry pieces of material, and sandpaper, just to name a few, as tactile objects next to her beanbag chair. I was optimistic and felt their knowledge and support would make a difference in Jacklyn’s life.

One Saturday morning after breakfast and after months of therapy, Karl and I placed Jacklyn on a mat to try to get some sense of her accomplishments. We placed her on her stomach, and, to our surprise, she pushed and held her head up.

We started cheering and yelling, and she rolled over. It might have taken her longer, but she achieved rolling over by herself. I couldn’t wait to tell everyone and write about this milestone in her journal.
Jacklyn’s seizures had been in control—now, it seemed, she had the upper hand over them. I was on an emotional high, almost dizzy with happiness to see her push up on her tiny arms and then roll over. I was yelling, “Look, Karl, look at her, look, yippee Jacklyn, yippee, keep going, wonderful job, my little peanut!” Karl and I were elated and cheering her on. He ran to the phone and started calling his parents to tell them the great news. I could hear him shouting, “She pushed up and rolled over.” As he was about to make another call, I hollered for him to hurry back into the room.

Karl stood in the hallway, grasping the railing, and his proud grin changed. Our happiness was short-lived, as a bout of seizures followed. Her teeny arms jerked upward above her head, collapsing at her side. At the same time, it propelled her chest upward, while her top lip pressed down and moved in one direction and the bottom lip went the opposite way. A red to almost bluish color overshadowed her face, and her eyes

**EEG Results**
were squinted, almost shut. As her face twitched, she seized repeatedly. I watched, helpless and discouraged, while waiting for the doctor to return our call. The crushing weight on my chest from panic pushed all the air from my lungs as I picked Jacklyn up, wrapping my arms around her and holding her close. I placed my outstretched fingers over her little head and gently rubbed, wishing I could magically erase this disease that had trapped her.

“Please, God, through my fingers, send a cure.” I sobbed, “Jacklyn, it’s going to be okay. Mommy and Daddy are here.”

Finally, her doctor called with detailed instructions on a medication change.

The seizures subsided. Jacklyn, exhausted from the episode, was resting. My adrenalin pumping, I became angry and focused on the inevitable consequences it would have on Jacklyn as she got older. She was just a baby now, but what would happen as she matured and the physical therapy and seizure medication did not help? I became angry at the doctors who were not rectifying what appeared to be many painful seizures. I became angry—at God, too. I was a good, church-going person, so why me? Why my baby? I even became angry at myself. I was a failure. I failed to produce a healthy child. Soon all my anger turned to fear. Fear for her future. Fear for our new family and the marital stress that could develop.

Within a few days, she was placed into the hospital for additional tests. It was late on a Friday afternoon that I sat quietly waiting for her to recover from the anesthesia. Karl was at work, anticipating my call. It was getting dark, as evening
was approaching. The adjacent rooms were vacant, and the entire hospital floor was strangely silent. Our room was dark, with only a small overhead bed light shining. The brightness from the adjacent parking lot lamps cast an eerie glow through the slanted blinds. I could see the attending nurse at the large reception station outside our room. Patricia was slender, with short, sandy-brown hair, and little makeup. She appeared to be alone handling the desk duties.

The metal guardrails on Jacklyn’s bed were up. They looked huge in contrast to her tiny body; she had absolutely no ability to move them. Our nurse checked on Jacklyn and asked me, “Do you need anything to make you more comfortable?”

“Thank you, no,” I replied. Then I asked, “When will the doctor see us with the test results?”

“I’ll find out,” she responded.

Mentally, I kept reassuring myself that everything was going to be fine. I had to hold on and believe. I comforted myself by whispering, “Relax. Keep calm. I must have faith because I’m in one of the best hospitals in the area, with the best doctors.”

A long time passed, and finally a young, tall, red-haired doctor entered the room. Expressionless, he strolled directly over to the hospital bed as I stood up to greet him. I was optimistic but soon felt flushed with fear as I grasped onto the cold, silver metal railing of Jacklyn’s bed. Surely this could not be more grave news. He introduced himself to me and then stated, “Her brain waves are abnormal. Her life expectancy will be short, probably only a few years.”

With this, I started to shake.
He continued by saying, “Didn’t anyone explain this to you?” He seemed agitated. I stared at him and attempted to speak but no words came out. I continued to shake, but now I was shaking so badly that the guardrails I was holding started to clang loudly. He then stated, “I have prior dinner plans with my wife and have to leave.” He promptly made an about-face and walked away, passing that nurse, who was still at her work station.

The clanging from the rails continued and was now loud enough to echo in the empty room. Soon, Patricia, our nurse, appeared with a cup of water. She slowly peeled each finger of my left hand and then my right off the long railing. She had a sympathetic touch, holding both my hands, squeezing them gently while gradually backing me into a side chair next to Jacklyn’s hospital bed.

As my body was trembling uncontrollably, she looked into my eyes and asked, “How are you and Jacklyn getting home?” She continued to speak to me gently and asked if I needed her to call someone to assist me.

Finally, I said, “My car is somewhere in the parking lot.” With her assistance, I telephoned Karl. He was at work, a few miles away.

Waiting for Karl to arrive, I thought, *My child looks so peaceful, covered in the crisp white hospital sheets*. My mind wandered. I imagined her in a little white coffin, in a white lace dress with ruffled white ankle socks. The glowing rays of light that surrounded her were blinding me. *No, no! I can’t allow that to happen. It had to be me instead, not her, not her. Please God, take me!* Sobbing, I buried my face into my lap.
As Karl entered the room, Patricia approached him. They talked briefly before she handed him some paperwork. Karl’s face was pale, and his eyes looked at me with concern and tenderness. He picked up Jacklyn, who was coming out of the anesthesia, gently patted her back, and kissed her. “Let’s go home.”

In the days that followed, I sensed how fortunate I was to be married to this man, as I lounged in bed longer than necessary, unable to start my day. I started to reminisce about my life to that point. I mentally wanted to transport myself back to another time and place.

The incident with the callous doctor delivering the EEG result to me still played out in my mind. The sound of the shaking guardrails continued to echo in my head. Clang! Clang! Clang! I fell asleep at night only to twitch each time I relived that moment. I was stuck somewhere between denial and acceptance, but my desire to give Jacklyn the best chance was unyielding. It was the only thing driving me. An opportunity for that was created by a recommendation to change her neurologist. I jumped at the prospect. The new hospital was located about one hour from our home in eastern Long Island. I planned to stay overnight with her in preparation of early-morning tests.

Driving up to the hospital building, I noticed it appeared strikingly taller in comparison to the surrounding structures. I parked and removed our belongings without waking Jacklyn.
up. She had just fallen asleep. Staring at her little face, so innocent, I loved how the sun reflected the red highlights in her auburn hair. They sparkled like bits of glitter sprinkled from a fairy godmother’s wand. As I headed toward the elevator, I broke out in a cold sweat, my palms tingling. A loud voice in my head kept saying, *What if you get more grave news and another doctor like the last one?*

Soon we settled into a private corner hospital room. Jacklyn woke up with a small seizure—the face that was so sweet looking just half an hour ago was now twisting and turning red. It was a small, short-lived seizure, and she came out of it quickly. Holding her close, I told her, “It will be fine, my pretty girl. They will fix you.” Kissing her cheek, I whispered, “This is a getaway weekend for you and Mommy.” I started playing her music box to fill the air with a happy sound to cover the beeping medical equipment just outside our door.

As Jacklyn and I settled into the hospital room, her new neurologist entered. She was a small woman, about five feet tall, with short blonde hair and soft brown eyes. She introduced herself and started to discuss in detail Jacklyn’s upcoming tests and prognosis. I tried to comprehend. I shook my head. It felt like she was speaking a foreign language. *What is wrong with me? I’m not right!*

“I’ll speak to your husband when he arrives tomorrow,” she stated in a soft voice while patting my shoulder. *Does she really see me—this shell of a person that is Jacklyn’s mother?*

After she left the room, I wanted someone to fix Jacklyn at any cost. I wanted to hear only good news. *Maybe it will be*
this doctor and this hospital! I was thankful that night to have a new doctor with the insight to see me for what I had become. I sensed she was far from a cold, detached physician. As I unpacked, a nurse gave me an extra food tray and asked if I needed anything. “No, this is perfect. Thank you,” I replied. The food tray was a thoughtful gesture. Kindness and understanding by those who welcomed me at this new hospital was the best medicine, and it didn’t cost anything.

During the night, I had trouble getting into a comfortable sleep position in the reclining chair. I found it impossible to turn from side to side. My back hurt—but not as much as the awful thoughts racing around in my head. It is there that the burden of anticipation regarding the next day’s schedule was weighing heavily. I prayed my rosary, asking that the answers to fix my child would soon be found.

Still being a novice to this routine, I decided to sleep on the wide windowsill instead of the recliner. Granted, it was a bit cold and hard, but sufficient. I had a clear view looking down at the people entering and leaving the main entrance. We were in a unit on one of the top floors of the hospital. I noticed a family with a young child exiting with balloons and fantasized that we would be happily leaving soon.

“Hello. Excuse me,” the nurse said as she entered our room. “I need to give Jacklyn her meds.” I nodded and gently lifted her into my arms while watching the nurse perform her duties. A syringe filled with liquid seizure medication was placed into the corner of Jacklyn’s mouth, followed by a slow push on the cylinder tube.
Kissing Jacklyn good night, I covered her with a blanket and tucked a pillow at her back and legs for support. I opened her music box for one final tune to play out before lowering the lights. Slowly I walked back to my windowsill bed, and thought, *How wise to have windows that did not fully open!*

I fell into a deep sleep, free-falling downward, spinning faster and faster as I was transported somewhere else in time, drifting and escaping the present.

Early-morning rays of sunshine woke me with warmth, touching my cheeks. The new day felt bright, but my windowsill bed had left me with aches and pains. Moving slowly, I checked on Jacklyn, and she was still asleep. Soon a teenage hospital volunteer entered. Becky had a spare breakfast food tray and offered me the meal. I thanked her. The hot coffee was weak but hit the spot. She told me she was a new volunteer. Her shift had ended, but her mom couldn’t pick her up for another hour. She also confessed that her boyfriend, also a new volunteer, had just started his shift. She wasn’t in a rush and asked if I wanted company. She looked melancholy, and I sensed she was troubled. I decided to ask her what was wrong.

“Oh, it’s boyfriend problems,” she replied. Then she asked me, “How did you find your husband?”

Pressing my lips together, I looked at her, so young, bright-eyed, with a fresh innocent view of the world. I was like that
so many years ago. As we continued, I asked if she really wanted to know the full story.

“Yes, please,” she replied. Escaping the present seriousness that brought me here, I recalled my early days—my first marital mistake, my second chance, and then, miraculously, a dream come true. I spilled out my life as if I wanted to prepare her for some of the challenges the future might hold.

For the next forty-five minutes, she listened as I recalled my past, beginning with childhood memories that transported me back to the days when I was a young girl—much younger than Becky. Like many young girls, I would play dress-up in a pretend white wedding gown and marry. This would be followed with baby dolls, bottle feeding, and diaper changing. As I grew from a child to an adult, I desired a career but never lost the passion to have a family.

My parents were dedicated, loved each other, and worked as a team. To me this was a relationship I yearned for. Yet on September 2, 1982, I faced the stark reality of my current situation. I found myself sitting in a divorce lawyer’s office as I rehashed in my mind how I’d gotten to this point in my life, especially being Catholic—and the only one in my immediate family who was a divorce statistic.

I was basically a gullible and soft-hearted person. A bit sheltered as a child, I always believed people were responsible and trustworthy. That was then, but this turn of events propelled me to become stronger and wiser. I had to take charge and follow my dream of someday having a family. My soon-to-be-ex-husband admitted, after we were married, that he
did not want children. For me, this was grounds for divorce. The annulment would take some time, and I already had the paperwork at home to review. I drew strength from recalling my grandparents’ enormous sacrifice to have a better life in America. The decisions they made were hard but necessary for them to reach their goals. I felt empowered to act and start anew. This was a setback, but I was determined it would not affect my lifetime vision.

My attorney sat behind his large cherry wood desk and started reviewing the divorce paperwork. He was an older man, small in stature, with a receding hairline. I found his advertisement in a local newspaper, quoting a low price for simple divorces. His office was neat, plain—not one that a prominent lawyer would occupy. Brown wooden panel walls and dull décor was the theme of his office. He did not have a secretary, and he handled all the documentation and transactions by himself. Nevertheless, the simple no-fault divorce was signed, sealed, and delivered to me, and I handed over my check in final payment for his services.

After visiting my attorney on that Friday afternoon, I spent the entire weekend working on my annulment. This was unfinished business if I wanted to be married in a Catholic church. It turned out to be more emotional than I imagined and a revelation on my part. As an independent woman, I had to be strong. There are steps in life that help define your maturity, and I realized that weekend that my decision was truly the right one toward my personal growth. I matured far more in a brief period than I could have ever imagined.
This was a wake-up call on the road of life. The only thing fouler would have been the lack of action on my part and a loveless marriage. Being truthful to your spouse and oneself is priceless. It’s part of one’s character and upbringing. I’ve learned that mutual goals, honesty, and respect would carry a relationship. Making an excuse and not facing the facts will lead only to disaster. Hopefully, my dream to have a future with a family could still come true. The following Monday, I arrived at work legally a free woman.

I learned a tremendous lesson in life. Starting to date again was scary. I was determined not to be fooled again. Before long I noticed eligible and potential men to date, but no one really interested me. Months passed, and I became more involved with projects at work as well as overseeing my mother’s needs now that my father was gone. She was the typical Italian mom—always making sure you had enough food. She never learned how to drive. My attempt to teach her on my father’s red Ford almost landed us on a neighbor’s front lawn.

One day, a newly hired young man named Karl started working in my office, and we had been assigned a few projects together with other team members. I needed his expertise on various technical problems I was having, and he obliged. His blue eyes were clear and bright. He had golden brown hair and a ruffled beard. I soon found myself attracted to him. We started to date, and I learned he was kind, patient, honest, understanding, and the most logical person I had ever met. He was smart and could communicate well at all levels of the business world, from bikers, all the way to presidents.
and CEOs of companies. I thought he was one in a million as well as a good cook, too. He had an Italian, Irish, and German background with qualities that were distinctive of each culture. He loved to dine at nice restaurants, and we did that often.

Since I was the older person in this relationship, I was concerned about our future. I wasn’t going to make any more mistakes. He left the company to explore other opportunities, but we continued to date. I discovered that an age difference of seven years did not matter. I did find it amazing that we had the same birth month and day. We had similar values and goals, and we respected each other. A bright future was ahead of us, and we were ready to make a life and family together. I hoped for a positive result as I waited patiently for the verdict from the church officials, looking forward to a new life spiritually and emotionally. Within a few months, I received my annulment. Karl proposed, and we married. Just over a month into our marriage, we learned I was pregnant.

One of the many beautiful things about finding true love is when you realize you want to give that special person everything. Having a family together is the greatest devotion and complete self-giving experience a couple can have. Life was good, and we were looking forward to making our dreams come true.

“Well, Becky—that’s my story,” I confessed.
“Thank you very much for sharing it with me. I hope to see you tomorrow,” she replied and gave me a long goodbye hug. I softly patted her back and then tossed her long hair off her face. Almost one hour had gone by, and Becky hadn’t said one word during that time, but her expression told me all I needed to know. Her surprised, wide-eyed, innocent look reminded me of myself in my younger days. Being there in the hospital with Jacklyn and not knowing what was coming left a big hole in the story. For now, though, I thought she’d heard enough!