

## CHAPTER 1

# JESUS WEPT

At first, I didn't know I was depressed. I thought I was just religious.

I knew I was beyond tired, beyond exhausted. I knew I was out of shape. I knew I was overworked. What I didn't know was that there was any way *not* to be any of those things. But then, part of depression *is* not knowing things can be other than the way they are. *This is horrible*, you think, *but I cannot change it. I have always been here and I always will be here. I can't leave.* Maybe there are little things you can do to make life more livable, but the basics are set, and the basics are not good. This is how things look from the trough.

In my office, a beautiful womblike room with wine-red walls and dark wood and stained glass windows, I tried to

create an oasis of beauty and quiet that would calm and nurture others, and might even calm and nurture *me*. I bought bunches of roses at the corner vegetable stand and arranged them in clear, round bowls of clean water. I lit scented candles, whose tiny flames reflected and multiplied in the facets of their crystal holders. I rocked in the wooden rocking chair. I played the chants of medieval monks and nuns, the music of Bach. Once in a while I played the Beatles, or something by Paul Simon. Not often, though: they reminded me too painfully of the confident young woman I was when those songs were new, and that young woman just didn't understand. *Get over it*, she said, dismissively.

I sneaked out the back door of the church and across the street to the chiropractor. *Your shoulders are like a rock*, he said every time. *I know*, I would answer. All my muscles were knots of anxious readiness. Readiness for what, I cannot say.

Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen—the heaped-up voicemail messages filled me with dread. Someone wanting something, someone to whom I owed work, someone reminding me of something I had failed to do. “Save,” I pressed, over and over. *Save me*, I thought sometimes, and sometimes something dark answered that nobody could save me.

My prayer was the weariness of a child exhausted from too much crying. Prayer in the beautiful wine-colored office

was prayer blinking back tears, prayer curiously devoid of hope, prayer even more curiously uninterested in its own outcome. I pressed “Save” and prayed to be saved myself. But I began to suspect that I would not be saved until I left my church and my family and my mind and my body, all the other things I could no longer lift, behind. There was no salvation for me, not here on the earth. The most I could hope for was silence.

And I began to long for that final silence. In my longing, death did not look cold. Or sad. It looked languorous, that motionless end of everything here. Seductive, calling me. I tried it out on my husband, the only person I trusted with such a dark vision.

“I want you to know something about how I feel. It’s important to me that you listen.”

“OK.” He knew of my pain, but did not know what to do about it. Not being able to do anything was hard on him.

“What I have to tell you is that I want to be dead.”

He said nothing. He waited.

“I want to stop and not have to start again.” He still did not move or speak. This I didn’t like. I wanted him to *do* something. I didn’t know what it was, but I wanted it. Even now, I still do not know what it was that I wanted him to do.

“Listen, I’m not going to kill myself. I don’t want you to think I might do that. I won’t.” This needed emphasizing.

I was not suicidal: no hoarding of pills, no planning of my own execution, no “ideation.” I would not kill myself. But I wanted to *be dead*. Wanted it to *happen* to me. I wanted to be taken out.

“When you’re dead,” I went on, “you don’t have to do anything. You just lie in your box. You’re in the ground with earthworms and seeds and other dead people, and you don’t know or care. You don’t mind. You are quiet.” I paused, and then I added, “And your spirit finally knows what it is to be with God, with nothing in the way, and it’s a wonderful thing to be with God.” I added that religious part almost as an afterthought, although I was pretty sure it was the case. I thought about heaven a lot.

This was a hurtful thing to say to one who loved me deeply. That I wanted to die, that the sweetness of his presence was not sweet enough to make me want to live.

Duty, on the other hand, *was* enough to keep me alive. I had a duty to be alive. I had a duty to him, to my children and grandchildren, to my church. I am not a person who shirks duty. I would not shirk the duty of being alive.

But I didn’t have to like it.

At night I lit more candles in crystal holders and eased myself into hot baths of lavender-scented water. The scent of the lavender rose with the steam; the heat of the water eased my aching joints. I took my old prayer book into

the bath with me, my wet hands pocking the thin pages with marks of water drops. The ancient words of the Church's daily prayer rose from me, thick with my tears. At other times, I took the same prayers to the chapel, where everything was clean and good, where the sun slanted through the stained glass and pooled rainbows on the floor. There, I often was not alone: another worshipper would join me, and the ancient words were a sweet conversation: "O God, make speed to save us." "O Lord, make haste to help us." *How lovely this is*, I would think as we went back and forth. *How lovely*, as we sang the words antiphonally at Sunday vespers. The depressed often report a loss of the experience of beauty, a flatness that covers everything once held dear and colors it grey. That was not my experience: rarely in my life has the beauty of prayer, of art, of music, of *everything* been more vivid to me than during those painful days. And rarely have I been so unable to derive anything from it beyond the ache of my own isolation. It was as if I beheld intense beauty through an impenetrable window of thick glass. I could not tear myself away from the loveliness, but neither could I myself become lovely.

The tomb of my misery barricaded itself against the persistent rapping of my anger at its door. *No, I am not angry*. Sorrow was august, but anger was unacceptable. But a tic-like drumming of my clenched hand against my right

thigh when someone irritated me became more and more frequent. “Stop that!” my daughter ordered when she saw me. “Do you know how you look when you do that? If you’re mad, just say so.” Mad? *Moi*? My anger was silent, or so I thought. In reality, it was getting louder: my voice more clipped, my tolerance of small inconveniences more slim, my strange beating of myself more obvious to others, more self-mutilating than before. It cannot have been a comfortable thing to see.

I will get up and take a walk in the morning, I promised myself each night. The endorphins generated by walking will help me feel better. Then I will have some energy. But my eyes flew open at ungodly hours—two, three. I would creep from our bed and take up residence in the guest room, tuning the radio to the BBC. Only the Brits and I were up at that hour. I would lie there in the scented dark—more candles—and listen to the cricket scores until I fell asleep. And then, at the normal waking time, I could not arise until it was time to go to work. I worked all day, every day. I worked from early morning until late at night. I worked and slept and woke up to listen to the cricket scores and slept again, fitfully. And then I arose and went back to work.

It seemed necessary, all this working. Necessary, but it seemed also to do little good.

My desk was covered with ineffectual piles of unmet obligations; one was dispatched only at the expense of another, and none were ever satisfied. I gave hurried lip service to healthy-minded ideas about what the clergy should do: they should take time for themselves, they should have a life outside the parish, they should get enough rest, they should take a sabbatical. But the “shoulds” in each of these unexceptionable recommendations rang in my ears louder than anything else, drowning out any grace they might have offered me. All of their gentle counsels took their places among the mountains of my unmet obligations. They felt no different from any of the others. Beyond the feeble palliation of stolen massages and scented baths and candles in crystal holders, my behavior gave not the slightest indication that I understood anything at all about self-care.

Oddly, so oddly that it can only have been by the grace of a loving God—who must by now have regarded me and those entrusted to my care with real alarm—my desperate condition ordinarily did not get in the way of my doing many people genuine good. From somewhere in its depths I daily summoned reserves of empathy and patience beyond what made any sense at all. I managed to preach with power. Looking back, I recall now that many of my sermons *were* about dying and going to heaven. Too many. And they were too heartfelt. That, and the surreptitious beatings

I endured at my own hand, would have been signs of my distress to anyone who knew the code. But few people did. And I certainly wasn't talking.

*We will be true to Thee 'til death*, we all sang one summer Sunday morning at the end of the 9:30 service. Another hymn about martyrdom, a favorite of mine. Something was strange, though: the room seemed to be concentrated in a tunnel ringed with black. Everything seemed to have slowed down. I sank to the floor at the chapel steps. *I'll just rest*. For how long? A minute? A year? Eventually, I awakened, covered with my own vomit and surrounded by a circle of frightened faces, protesting only weakly when the emergency medical services came to cart me away and not at all when a cardiologist who was suddenly *mine* cleaned out a blocked artery in my heart as casually as he would have unstopped a kitchen drainpipe.

Oh. *That's* what's wrong. I have a heart condition. Neat and clean, a heart condition—except for the vomit. Physical and, it later turned out, electrical as well. Arrhythmia. Medicines for it, lots of medicines. Maybe a pacemaker. This was *electrical*. Oh, good.

I would rest. I tried and failed to write—too tired. My pulse was in the thirties—no wonder I was too tired. I read murder mysteries. I dozed through visitors. I slept all night and much of each day. I came home. I sat at the picnic



table. It was beautiful and green in the garden. A heart condition. How lovely.

I was back at work in two weeks. The vestry made me promise to moderate my work schedule. *Yes, I will.* And I did. I kept a log of my working hours. I didn't count the telephone work from home, or the fourteen-hour Sundays. *Progress, not perfection*, I told myself cheerfully. I told myself and others that I was slowing down. That was not true. What I was doing was speeding up, slowly.

When the World Trade Center collapsed, though, there was no pretending anymore. All bets were off. Prayer vigils. Food collections—food, and clean socks and eyedrops and stuffed animals, pouring into the church from all sides. We were in New York, and we could get these things to the site, couldn't we? Yes, certainly. Tragedy brings out the best in people, but it also brings out the worst: the drunks got drunker, the crazy got crazier, the needier got needier. All around me, people were either rising magnificently to the occasion, or falling apart. Some were doing both.

Interestingly, *I* felt better. Of course I can help. Of course I have time to talk. Of course I will go. Who could stay away? The pile of twisted metal and plastic and paper and dust, of hidden bits of human flesh and bone rose high above the ground and went down many stories below it. Workers swarmed over it like ants. The train stations and

construction fences wore papers with color photocopies of the missing: *Maybe she became confused and wandered off, and at this very minute maybe she is somewhere in this city, huddled with other amnesiac WTC office workers around a rusty trash can with a fire burning in it to keep them all warm. Maybe. Maybe.* Because you can't disprove the negative, can you?

This was terrible. It was so terrible that my own darkness became irrelevant, a grandiose bid for neurotic attention. *Don't you know what's happened here? How can you even think about your own despair at a time like this?* And I didn't. Not me. And—again by the grace of a loving God, who sighed and used even me—I and the people of God with whom I lived and worked put our shoulders into helping, all of us, became part of the greatest outpouring of human kindness New York had seen in a long, long time.

My adversary just waited. It knew I was no match for it, that it didn't matter how important my important work was. It knew its patience would be rewarded, but I did not know. I thought I was better. It was good to have a sense of purpose again. Good to feel effective. Good to know there were concrete, exhausting tasks on which to spend myself. Good to lead. Good to be *good*. Vestry records from those months show that I reported that I was completely healed, that I was my old self now. The drug of care for

others coursed through my veins—I see now that it was a hallucinogen. It allowed me to believe that I was fine. I was anything but fine.

Because I could not allow myself to acknowledge my own hidden pain, my body once again did the honors. Another collapse: I began to stammer slightly during the announcements, saw the same tunneling blackness, said that I needed to sit down, looked without speaking at the same alarmed faces and allowed myself to be led away.

Nobody was buying my lies now. I had not slowed down like I said I would. I had attempted to bury my disease in the dry leaves of my frantic performance, in the embroidery of my duties. More heart medicine. More reassuringly technical scans and tests. And something else, now: medicine that would insinuate itself into the chemistry of my brain, that would tamper with my own way of interpreting what happened in my world. The juice of joy was in short supply among the neurons; the medicine would help me make more. Imagine.

The heart thing was real. I had a real blocked artery. The arrhythmia was real, too. Dangerous things, both of them. But I know that the real reason I could not continue was the crushing weight of unacknowledged despair I carried with me everywhere. I believe that my body's wisdom triumphed over my mind's denial so that I could live, and

I believe that I would have died if my body had not given out and given up. I never would have killed myself, but I would have seen to it that the church killed me. Had it been left to me, I never would have stopped. And I would be dead now.

And I am not dead. I am alive. My life has changed dramatically. I have said good-bye to people and things I hated to leave, chief among them that brave, funny little church and all the beloved people in it. I have told the truth about what I can and cannot give. Sparingly, I have even told it out loud, in public, and have been rewarded for that judicious sharing by the answering stories of many other good and faithful people who have battled my old enemy, too. *You're depressed?* one of them will ask, seeming a bit surprised that I would own up to such a thing in front of people, and I answer with a firm *Yes*. That's probably the most useful thing I say to anyone there.