

The Greatest Serenade

by

Jamie Buckingham

(This unpublished work was written sometime in the early to mid-1980s)

I missed the song of the whippoorwills in the early morning hours that year. Each year, since we moved out into the pine trees in the rural section of our little Florida community, the whippoorwills had returned with their plaintive calls coming through the tall trees that surrounded our house, wafting their echoing voices into our upstairs bedroom long before dawn.

They usually show up in late January and stay until May before migrating back north. That year, however, perhaps because of the unseasonal rain and the constant problem of standing water beneath the trees on our 20-acre homestead, they did not appear at all.

I missed them. Some of my fondest memories of childhood include the call of the whippoorwill – mixed with the smell of night-blooming jasmine – outside my bedroom window.

Growing up in the little town of Vero Beach on the Florida east coast, we lived in a rural setting not unlike where we are now. Lying awake in bed at night with the windows open, or sleeping out in my little tree house on the edge of the orange grove, the night calls of the hoot owls and the whippoorwills, signaling each other back and forth through the tropical hammock, were part of all I held dear in childhood.

That was one of the wonderful bonuses when we moved out of the subdivision to our rural acreage with trees and pasture – listening to the whippoorwills in winter and spring.

That spring we were not without morning songs. A small convention of mockingbirds came alive at dawn – joined by thrush and lark – in beautiful harmony. Those balmy days, with the daylight rushing at us with the arrival of spring, had given us freedom to throw open the bedroom windows at night. As sunrise approached the chirping and singing beckoned us back to life long before my mechanical alarm buzzed its raucous warning of pending day.

But all that was incidental to a far deeper song we were experiencing in our hearts that spring. In early February Jackie's surgeon gave us bad news about lumps in both her breasts. His preliminary examination led him to believe immediate surgery was necessary. The first step was surgical biopsy on both sides. (Several years earlier, Jackie's sister died from breast cancer.)

Jackie and I are part of a small group – a "home church" – which is part of our larger church body. We have been in close relationship with these four families for a number of years. Before we made any decision we asked the group to meet. They came to our house. We told them the situation and submitted ourselves to them – and the Lord – in prayer.

The group leader asked Jackie to sit in a chair in the middle of the room. The four couples, and I, then stood around her – laying hands on her head, shoulders and arms. I anointed her with oil in the name of Jesus Christ. As we gathered in the presence of this loving, caring, “extended family,” I was aware we were part of something that stretched all the way back to the Alpha of God. Despite the threatening circumstances, we felt peace.

Nothing “happened” when we prayed. We felt peace, but there were no lightning flashes or rolling thunder. But after the group had left, and Jackie and I were getting ready for bed, we talked. Both of us felt we should not sign the surgical release requested by the surgeon – a release which would have authorized him to perform radical surgery on both sides if the initial biopsy was positive. This is a common procedure. A preliminary biopsy would be done while Jackie was under anesthesia. If it came back positive he would go ahead and remove her breasts while she was still on the table under anesthesia.

After we got in bed we prayed again – just to make sure. Both of us felt it was right to take the biopsy, but for some strange reason were not comfortable about signing the release for more surgery. We wanted to walk through this slowly – one step at a time – with ample prayer support.

The surgeon reluctantly agreed. “It’s your body,” he said.

Jackie went into surgery. The doctors removed tissue from both breasts and sent it immediately to the lab. The report came back in minutes. The frozen section showed disease. Since we had not signed the surgical release, however, the physician was not free to perform the radical mastectomy he had recommended. Instead, he requested a full pathology report on the tissue – a procedure which would take about three days.

I talked to the surgeon as Jackie was coming out of the anesthesia. He outlined the possibilities as we stood in the hall outside her room. He was still dressed in his surgical green, his voice very matter of fact. It all depended on the final pathology report. But on the basis of the preliminary report he said one of three things would happen.

- 1) I could take her home, let the incisions heal for a few months, then bring her back for surgery and treatment.
- 2) I could take her home the next day, but bring her back next week for radical surgery.
- 3) If the cancer was already in her system the only prognosis was death.

Once again the home group met. Again they prayed, laying on hands. The same peace we felt earlier returned. Somehow we knew everything was okay – even though all the signs pointed toward disaster.

The final pathology report came four days later. The doctor called. For some reason, the full report differed radically from the preliminary report. There were no active cancer cells. His earlier diagnosis was misleading. The radical surgery he had projected was not going to be necessary.

It was a week later before we realized what had actually happened. Aside from the miracle – for which we praised God profusely – came the realization that had we signed the standard release, the surgeon would have gone ahead, on the basis of the first report, and removed both breasts. When he removed the stitches, on Jackie's last visit to his office, the surgeon told Jackie she was a very "lucky lady."

She smiled, and corrected him. "Not lucky – but blessed. There is a difference, you know."

He didn't seem to know. But we do. And while others have been called to walk through the deeper waters and emerge singing their song in a minor key of pain, we wake every morning with a melody in our heart far sweeter than the song of the birds outside our window. It is the song of resurrection, of life – and it is new every morning.

The next year the whippoorwills returned. And they have been back each year since. We welcome them for their melodies bring to mind the song of Jeremiah. "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail us. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

Today, listen for the songs from heaven – and give thanks for God's faithfulness.