Watchful women

By Martha Spong
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When my mother died early on a spring evening in 1993, the ladies of the garden club and the bridge club gathered around my family to stand sentinel over the old-fashioned ritual of paying calls on the bereaved. My parents lived in a Southern city, in a Federal-period house, in a neighborhood called Olde Towne. The formal, high-ceilinged living spaces, furnished with antiques from both sides of the family, might have left you wondering what year you had walked into—had it not been for the living room's custom armoire, which matched the crown moldings and held a color television.

But the armoire doors were uncharacteristically closed. So was the door at the end of the long, wide hallway—a door I had never known my parents to shut. It led to the kitchen they modernized in 1974, hoping to create some informal family space. On the days between Mother's death on Saturday and her funeral the following Wednesday, the public rooms felt calm and cool and still. From nine in the morning until late in the afternoon, the ladies took turns answering the door. They perched on the Empire period sofa in the front hall and jumped up at the sound of the bell.

People came to the front door all day long, but my father and I felt no pressure to see each and every one. They received a greeting and the news of our availability from the watchful women. This meant we could rest or go to the bathroom or take a phone call knowing that no one would be turned away. It was a ritual of hospitality that provided no small relief.

I've often thought of the women who went to Jesus' tomb in relationship to the ladies whose names were written on a spiral notebook page, their shifts determined in sad-toned phone calls on the night Mother died. Most of them were older than my

mother, who died at 67 from metastatic melanoma. Some were close enough to us that I had been taught to call them Aunt, though they were not our relatives. They worked out their grief with industry and faithfulness, anointing us with gifts of food: Brunswick stew and collard greens and special chicken salad from a favorite local shop. I appreciated being able to withdraw to the kitchen, behind that closed door at the end of the hall, to sit at the round table and listen to my mother's friends talk about ordinary things, helping to make the time go by during those long, in-between days.

One of Mother's friends had been ill with cancer herself, receiving radiation treatments that damaged her taste for food and therefore her appetite. Her family worried about keeping her strong enough to survive the treatment intended to save her. Nothing tasted good.

Yet she came to take her turn that Tuesday, and during a lull in the visits, we sat at the kitchen table together, each of us with pieces of chicken-salad sandwich cut carefully into quarters. On my plate were four, but on Aunt Shippy's only two. She bit into the first of the small triangles, and her eyebrows went up just a little. Then she took another bite. "This tastes good," she said, with a tone of mild amazement.

I'm not claiming the chicken salad was miraculous, although it was the best I've ever eaten. But Shippy started feeling better and growing stronger that spring of my mother's death. She recovered and lived for two more decades, well into her nineties. And even without knowing what the future would hold, in that moment at the table I felt a shift, a little resurrection, a victory over death.