

A Trail of Tears

by Linda Daniels

I grew up, in a house divided. Our family called military duty stations Home, and we were modern day Nomads. I was 5 years old when Daddy got Orders to Okinawa, (but we couldn't go).

Mama cried, because he'd be gone a year, but my Daddy didn't cry. He was a United States Marine, Drill Sargent tough. Mama was a Southern lady-delicate and soft. Before Daddy left, we went to his "Family Reunion," on the 'Pemi' River, in New Hampshire. Then he flew overseas, and we went Home to Georgia.

Weekends, we'd drive over to Great Granny's farm house, on the Chattahoochee. Mama's parents got divorced when she was little, and that's why she grew up on Granny's farm. Nobody talked about Mama's real Mama. I imagine she was beautiful (like Mama) but behind closed doors, I heard she was alcoholic.

Granddaddy (Mama's Daddy) gave us a puppy! The cutest, little black and white terrier - And Mama said, "Yes", we could keep her. Me and my sisters (Laurie and Pau Pau) named her Angel. And we were

'over the moon' happy! Especially Mama, growing up, she loved her pets and farm animals. So they naturally loved her too.

One day, Aunt Sister took us girls and Angel for the weekend. When we got home, Daddy was there. Mama was so glad to have him back, she cried happy tears. Then, we headed out West, in a brand new station wagon. We stopped at the farm, for goodbyes and more crying. Except me and Daddy. We were tough. We got busy checking out the car rack, and tires. It was SO fun driving 'cross country with Angel. She made us laugh! Then we settled down, in California.

Sadly, the next year, Angel was hit by a car - and I thought it was my fault. I shouted her name, but she didn't understand. She ran in front of the car, and was killed. She was gone. At dinner, all us girls were sniffing and crying, but still trying to eat..."STOP CRYIN'!" Daddy SHOUTED, pounding his fist on the table. "Or we'll NEVER get another dog!"

After the silence, Mama excused herself to put Pau Pau to bed. Daddy got up, so I started clearing dishes, and Laurie went to the kitchen to rinse. Daddy rolled the new dishwashing machine into place. Mama'd been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. She needed her rest - And, she was expecting another baby. We finished up, and

Laurie went to bed, tears still brimming. Daddy tried not to notice, gathering supplies and shoes for polishing.

Mama was in her rocking chair, so I crawled up into her pregnant lap - almost too big to fit. But she didn't mind. She wanted to tell me a story, about a little biddy she got one Easter. It followed her everywhere - she loved that biddy. One day the little chick walked too close to the hog pen and a big ole hog snatched her, and gobbled her up. Mama said how she cried - sometimes it was good to cry. I listened to Mama, and I loved her for that story, but I didn't cry.

I told Mama my head hurt. Daddy brought me baby aspirin, but didn't say anything. He just kept on, like Angel didn't die - and wasn't gone. Like he hadn't dammed up our grief, pounding on the dinner table. So, it was just us three. Daddy polishing shoes. Walt Disney was on TV, but I just watched Daddy polish those shoes, like he always did, every Sunday night. Mama scratched my head, real gentle. I wanted to cry, but couldn't - didn't have permission.

In a couple months, we had a baby brother! It was a difficult birth. Mama's arthritis flared up. And we were Moving again. East, to Virginia, then Alabama. Granddaddy gave us new puppies, Peanut.

Then Rascal. But I didn't get too close to them, I was outgrowing dogs. Daddy got Orders to Vietnam and Mama's arthritis got worse.

When Daddy got home, we moved back to Georgia. But Mama had to go to Bethesda, twice, for surgery on her hands and knees. She hated being away. It was hard to see Mama, sweet and kind, but so fragile - hurting, and taking all that medicine. Sometimes, the pain was constant and Mama ached, but she never talked about that. She was always so happy to be home. And everything was always better, when she was there.

My 16th Birthday, was a fare-well party. We had Orders. I was furious - I COULDN'T go! I had a boyfriend! But there I sat, in the backseat of another station wagon. Buried in a novel, and wishing I could cry - just to catch my tears in a plastic spoon and flick them at Daddy's head - like the girl in that book. Daddy, just kept driving down the interstate... across the endless desert, in 'West Texas'.

Back in California, things picked up. We connected with Marine families we knew. Rascal was happy to be with Mama - always there. He helped with the pain. Different doctors were trying new medicines, the old ones were tearing up Mama's stomach.

After school one day, Mama's friend - Miss Betty, told us Mama needed an emergency operation. She took us out to dinner. The Wives Club brought food to the house. Friends came over, and left - it felt like a funeral. It was late. I couldn't sleep. I tried to do homework - a paper on the definition of "Time". I lost track of it...

Then I saw headlights thru the window. I heard the door open, and Rascal dancing around, looking for Mama. Daddy's heels clicking down the hall. His hand was on my shoulder when I turned - tears were in his eyes. I stared. Daddy never cried. Mama technically "died" on the operating table that night. "We almost lost her Linny", he said. "But she's gonna make it."

My knees buckled, and I hugged Daddy close. We were, leaning against each other - In a perfectly balanced, state of collapse. We held each other up, and we both cried. In that flood of tears, it dawned on me, that Daddy was softer than he seemed, and Mama was stronger than I thought. I let Rascal in my room that night, in case he wanted to sleep with me, while Mama was away.

I've considered rebuilding the dam that held my childhood tears.
Sometimes, during career challenges. When I almost lost my Baby.
The year Mama died. But I remember leaning into Daddy. And I cry -
for the little girl who couldn't, and the woman I've become. Daddy
still cries too..

And when it rains... I think of Mama, and all the Angels I've ever
loved.